

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM: *WHAT SUZZIE WANTS*, STORIES OF OTHERS

by

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Abstract

Culture and religion are some of the oppressive tools being used to subjugate the fundamental rights of women in Nigeria. The need is for a nexus amongst the different fragments of feminism to speak against customs of exploitation and subjugation, but not at the expense of the good culture of the land and in a way not to create loss of identity. To get the message across, some real stories must be told. Aligning narrative craft to share the different experiences that I have witnessed firsthand or told me by the victims of these vast injustices is the focus of this thesis, so the world may learn that there are these experiences and fundamental gender oppressions still exist.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Introduction	1
Clannish Claw	18
Begging Mercy	42
Papal Entreatment	62
Amiss Nowhere	81
What Suzzie Wants	86
Table D'Hote	89
Fargin	92
Works Cited	100
References	102

Acknowledgement

My Canada immigration story started in Fall 2016. I almost ran back home to the equator. It was made worse by the stern warning on the lips of every Canadian and some other migrators that I met: “This is no cold, brace up for minus 20.” But as those warnings were coming so were the warmest smiles I have ever seen on the faces of humanity. Lovely people with beautiful smiles made me warm and already I call Prince George home.

Rob Budde is wonderful, and he made my stay at UNBC worthwhile. He pushes me when he must, always telling me to make haste while the sun shines. I am a work in progress, changing from the last-minute man to getting things done quite earlier in time. Ose ore mi atata!

The contribution by Dr Dee Horne and Dr Si Transken is in no small measure. I appreciate their steadfastness to keep me on my toes. Dr Sola Ogunbayo is a gem.

Jeff Underwood and Kate Taylor are great friends sending their warmest love from the USA.

My mother raised a man that I have grown to be and proud of. I wrote these stories because of her; God bless her soul. My respect will always remain for my father. And my siblings are the best.

I am the luckiest man on earth. I have the kindest woman for a wife and we have the cutest

son together. I love you both.

My sincere gratitude to everyone.

INTRODUCTION TO *WHAT SUZZIE WANTS*: DISCOURSE ON PATRIARCHY IN SOME SELECTED TEXTS

When I was born, people in our village commiserated with my mother and nobody congratulated my father. I arrived at dawn as the last star blinked out. We Pashtuns see this as an auspicious sign. My father didn't have any money for the hospital or for a midwife, so a neighbour helped at my birth. My parents' first child was stillborn, but I popped out kicking and screaming. I was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain, their role in life simply to prepare food and give birth to children.

- Malala Yousofzai, *I Am Malala*.

I grew up with a woman that was submissive to the whims of her husband; whatever he said was law, even to the point of accepting his untold excesses as cultural. Her husband has three wives. I never liked the woman being abused, most times she got beaten in public spaces; many times, she was accused of extra-marital affairs which were totally unfounded, but her husband never missed a chance to humiliate her. Each time I tried to challenge her tormentor, she would admonish me never to stand up to him because 'he is her lord'. She passed few years ago after suffering a stroke, a result of the many beatings she had received from her husband. Then she became the woman I used to know. I see several other women suffering the same or even greater injustice, nothing else, but because they are women and the society somewhat permits this oppression through religion, culture, tradition and economy.

I boldly wear pink and I am conscious of gender in my language as much as I can be. I work against patriarchal standards in my everyday activities. I joyfully take on any household chores (regardless of what the society I grew up in regards as sex roles) and many more. But, according to the rules of my culture, I am the only one allowed to have a lovechild. My wife would be a ‘goddamn cheat’ if she goes outside of our matrimonial home for any form of sexual gratification. It would be a ‘sin’ that will be unforgivable. If overlooked (by myself) the community will see it as an aberration that may elicit a public ululation. This is how I am part of a gendered ideology specific to my culture:

...the gender order is a patterned system of ideological and material practices, Performed by individuals in a society, through which power relations between women and men are made, and remade, as meaningful. It is through the gender order of a society that forms, or codes of masculinities and femininities are created and recreated, and relations between them are organised. (Pilcher & Whelehan 64)

The binaries of masculine and feminine inherent in any community, but especially Nigeria, always accord greater privileges to the ‘alpha male’ and may not see the need to uphold the rights of a woman as it is believed that, because of perceived ‘competencies’, a woman will eventually end up in a man’s kitchen, regardless. Hence, she is considered inferior not worth great investment:

The binaries are used as an “analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to draw inform behaviours and competencies... (Pilcher and Whelman 56).

The common perception of a Nigerian is that a boy is worth more than gold and dozens of women are cheap wares and not worth good job earnings.

Adichie expresses some of the oppressive directions for women:

We spend too much time teaching girls to worry about what boys think of them. But the reverse is not the case. We don't teach boys to care about being likable. We spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough, which is bad enough, but then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons.

All over the world, there are so many magazine articles and books telling women what to do, how to be and not to be, in order to attract or please men. There are far fewer guides for men about pleasing women.

I have been asked many times how much of feminism I have in my blood, especially when my background reeks of high-level Nigerian patriarchy, and my answer has always been flat: "In as much as I have a sister, a friend, a daughter and a wife that I wouldn't want to go through the hell my mother went through I will always stand up and work to break these shackles." To me, this feminism is personal. The power dynamics I see personally are theorized by many:

The nature and forms of violence against women arise from patriarchy broadly defined here: as a system of male dominance, legitimated within the family and society through superior rights, privileges, authority and power. The degree to which this happens and the forms in which such power is exercised vary between cultures and societies. The process of subordination is generally achieved by devaluing women's contribution, while at the same time extracting significant contribution from them. (Brown ii)

The rising awareness the feminist movement is gaining is a positive wheel of change to challenge the patriarchal order in the world. But there is a common saying in my tribe: "*Ai rin po omo ejo lo mu iya je omo ejo*" - "*lack of camaraderie amongst the Ophidia (Serpents) makes them easy preys*":

The need for intersectionality in feminism, especially as more women of different cultures, races, religions, genders, and sexual orientations are getting more and more enlightened thereby complaining of being alienated by the [sometimes] ‘homogeneity’ stance of First-wave feminism is a phenomenon worthy of study, especially when the fallout of this elitist stance has led to different groupings in what should have been a formidable front to fighting sexist oppression.... (Collins 42)

The foremost proponent of Intersectional Feminism, Kimberlé Crenshaw, about three decades ago during a presentation at the University of Chicago Legal Forum described the concept as “something greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Huffpost). In a recent interview, Crenshaw clearly defines this important term again: “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there[...].” (law.columbia); it is interlayers of subjugation that women are placed under, not just because of their sex but on ethnicity, sexuality, economic background and a number of other indices that could be attached to women. It is this layering that many of my stories are concerned with, especially as they affect the real lives of women in my country.

For this thesis, I will stick with the classical definition of feminism, the recognition of women’s rights as human rights, since “feminism has never been a unified body of thought and there are several ways that feminism and feminist theories can be contemplated” (Appelrouth and DesforEdles 316). Despite the different (dis)colorations and fragmentations in the movement, there are common grounds in the body polity of the movement: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Girl-child education, Reproduction Rights, Gender parity are general to them all. Hegemonic feminism is pushing this view with the sole goal of giving no consideration to a class

and race analysis. By seeing equality with men as the goal of feminism, this view has an individual rights-based, rather than justice-based vision for social change (Thompson 336). Even though, some societies have moved on to what could be said to be greater issues, some still face challenges. In Nigeria, for example, there is still a need to tell these stories. As the latter part of this thesis demonstrates, the world needs to know there are still tales of some of the earliest struggles of feminism:

Literature is a powerful ideological tool that influences as well as responds to sociocultural and political discourses. Literary representations therefore can debunk stereotypical notions about marginalized groups in grappling with problematic issues of ethnicity and identity and intersections of race, gender, and class (Purkayastha 3798).

This writing may not be some *belles-lettres* as the stories are written with utmost sparseness to mirror the stark subjugation of women which are the gender realities in Nigeria and the feeling that one gets when patriarchy, however one may look at it, is confronted. Also, the stories are meant to show the critical state of the Nigerian society with regard to women's rights. It is expected that this will awake as well as raise the consciousness of the people who will treat the need for women's rights as an urgent call to respecting and honoring those rights regarding the issues raised in the latter section of this work, wherever such are still practised. And even in the so-called advanced societies where feminism and especially gender equality seems to have gained prominent ground, "one could (not) be complacent, for the second idea was equal power; that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength" (Balwin 604).

While the world was liverish to the news of the different sexual exploitations of powerful men in Hollywood, I joined the fray like any other in condemning the acts, but my mind went

back to my dear fatherland where it is a given that once you are a VIP, you are seemingly above the law. If there will be anyone who would be bold enough to come out to narrate her tale of having been sexually harassed or exploited by a VIP, the typical reaction from the Nigerian populace is usually that of condemnation of such an individual for being blind to the many opportunities that come with being associated with such a VIP in the first instance. Mostly, the women are accused of being the seducers in such cases. The man goes scot free. And very recently, a renown Professor of Accounting (in my alma mater), was called out for sexual exploitation of his female students for marks. With the stunning audio evidence available to convince the public, where the lecturer's distinct voice could be heard negotiating the rounds and number of times he is going to have sex with the student before he would pass her could be heard, but it was pathetic the State did not deem it fit to investigate and prosecute.

On May 23, 2018, the lady in the eye of the storm in an interview with CNN relayed the bitter experience. Immediately the audio went viral, she went into hiding in order to avoid any form of backlash that might follow such a situation. When she eventually summoned the courage to come out, she was ridiculed and rejected everywhere she went: "A guy came up to me at the bank and said, 'Is this not the girl who harassed a lecturer?' and he called me a prostitute. The security guard then had to push me away to go withdraw my money inside the bank" (*CNN*).

It has long sunk into my head, that some cultures, religions, rites, etc. have programmed the society to love women for the 'use' of women, and not for the genuine love or contribution of women. I remember that, always; that is the astounding reality of Nigeria at present.

The selected texts that are considered in this thesis can be said to align with the concept of Narrative Identity—which is formation of identity based on people's firsthand experiences which

are internalized into a growing story which gives a drive towards alignment and goal(s) in life (McAdams 242). Memoirs are typical examples in this regard.

Unlike Chinua Achebe's popular novel, *Things Fall Apart* where absolute patriarchy and crass misogyny could be read practically on every page of the book through Okonkwo, *Girls at War* is of a different stock altogether, if read from the point of view of a feminist. Although, the major thematic preoccupation of the story is about the marginalized people of Biafra, the underlying sexist preoccupation in the story cannot be ignored and this is of a paramount importance to my understanding patriarchy and the struggle for gender-parity in a typical Nigerian setting, and the mockery of the feminist movement in some quarters, even today.

Achebe was born in Eastern Nigeria in 1930, an era when the colonial masters still had control over Nigeria. His works are concerned with traditional Igbo life and which portrays the different denigrating positions of the culture towards women, thereby depriving them control over their own lives. But when I got to read, *Girls At War*, it was obvious to me that Achebe was indeed a man that wrote about the struggles of the society he belonged; he wrote about cultural identity in his popular novel and while he was doing that, even to his death, he never overlooked the need for true liberty for everyone, gender-wise, within the conclave to which they belong. This is the same thing I am trying to achieve with this thesis. Culture and traditions as they are meant to be observed are not meant to subjugate anyone in whatever guise.

The story consists of two major characters, Reginald Nwankwo who is a government official and Gladys, an aspiring young lady who against all odds tries to offer herself to contribute meaningfully to the agitation for self-rule of her people; to making sure that the people of Biafra truly get what they are entitled to. They both—Reginald and Gladys—meet at a checkpoint which can be symbolically said to be the nexus for both genders. The story is full of interplay and

intrigues bothering on girl-child freedom and how she is perceived (as a prostitute) if she acts out of the traditional 'norm' to expressing her liberty. Reginald takes Gladys home and they make love, when they both went to a party later in the evening, he starts taking her to be a prostitute, meanwhile, he himself is a married man that is supposedly on his way to take food he had taken from the refugee camp to his family.

“You gave me a lift to Enugu that time I left school to go and join the militia.”

“Ah, yes, you were the girl. I told you, didn't I, to go back to school because girls were not required in the militia. What happened?”

“They told me to go back to my school or join the Red Cross.”

“You see I was right. So, what are you doing now?”

“Just patching up with Civil Defence.” (2)

That was the day he finally believed there might be something in this talk about revolution... He didn't doubt that the girls and women took themselves seriously... But so did the little kids who marched up and down the streets... The prime joke of the time among his friends was the contingent of girls from a local secondary school marching behind a banner: WE ARE IMPREGNABLE (Achebe 2).

The girl-child is seen as not a feasible contributor to humanity, beyond reproductive falconry; another vessel to be used just for population purpose.

Achebe's submission resonates when recently there was a piece of information being circulated in the Nigerian media that the Federal Government was planning to stop the recruitment of women into the Nigerian Armed forces. It was vehemently denied by the government.

Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the differential treatment the armed forces give men and women. Many women of the armed forces have come out to say they have been left on the same rank for a very long time where their male colleagues may have been promoted two or three ranks ahead and when such promotions were given, they come with some demands on them that are usually outside of their official duties. Many may have to sleep their way through.

The struggle for ‘emancipation’ as highlighted by Achebe in *Girls at War* is no different from Walker in *Bothers and Sisters*. The verisimilitude of life as it was in Walker’s story could not be said to have been different to what is presently obtainable in a typical Nigerian community.

Walker’s autobiography of her growing up years resonates distinctly with my personal experience. Each time I do a recollection of my growing up days under the tutelage of my father, I detest the indoctrination of oppression against women that he unconsciously passed down to me. At that time, he had twelve children, and his five boys were the ‘rockers’ of the town. He had a big house and he would call us to his feet in the evening under the moonlight right in front of his house. He assured us that we had the liberty to do what we wanted with any girl of our choice. After all, he had a big house to accommodate the results of whatever wild oats we would sow but he prohibited his seven girls from interacting with any man. He rewarded any of his boys who would come home with a report of seeing any of the girls talking with a man. Of course, the girls would get punished; ‘celibates don’t talk to men.’ The term ‘celibate’ is only for girls.

Walker extrapolates her elder sister’s situation, and one could also tell that the same was her experience:

My father expected all of his sons to have sex with women. “Like bulls,” he said, “a man needs to get a little something on his stick.” And so, on Saturday nights, into town they went, chasing the girls. My sister was rarely allowed into

town alone, and if the dress she wore fit too snugly at the waist, or if her cleavage dipped too far below her collarbone, she was made to stay home.

“But why can’t I go too,” she would cry, her face screwed up with effort not to wail.”

“They’re boys, your brothers, that’s why they can go.” (Walker 328)

Adichie in her TED Talk, *We Should All Be Feminists* which was later modified to a book awakens the consciousness of many to the common slippery state of patriarchy in our common existence as a people:

I often make the mistake of thinking that something that is obvious to me is just as obvious to everyone else. Take my friend Louis... I did not understand how Louis could not see what seemed so evident. (Adichie)

Adichie recounts her childhood experience where she was denied the captaincy of her class, even after meeting the prerequisite for the ‘office’, solely because she is a girl:

Then to my surprise, my teacher said the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier; she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second-highest score on the test. And he would be monitor. (Adichie)

For every society there is subtle or overt imposition of restraints based on gender differences. Religion is one of the organised machinery used in passing this oppression down. From time immemorial, women have been the subject of subjugation.

The story of Satrapi is pathetic, despite the collective struggle to get Iran back on the track of liberty through true representation, the different policies that followed, apart from being generally suppressive, put the womenfolk in a disadvantaged position by imposing draconian rules on them, restraining their movements and dressing. The veil was imposed to curtail them from

exposing their physical beauties and they would not be allowed to walk freely alone on the street without being accompanied by a man. When Marji's mother did not wear the veil, two fundamentalists approached her, and she recounted the terrible experience:

They insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed against the wall and fucked and then thrown in the garbage and that if I don't want that to happen, I should wear the veil. (Satrapi 74)

The major excuse given by the bigots: "Women's hair emanates rays that excite men. that's why women should cover their hair!" (Satrapi 74). Further, Satrapi writes, "and so to protect women from all potential rapists, they decided that wearing the veil was obligatory (74).

Bapsi Sidhwa, another foremost gynocentric writer chronicled her life experiences during the partitioning of her home country in *Cracking India*. *Give some examples from Sidhwa's work or do not bring her work up*. This feminist describes the different treatments being meted out to a typical woman of that era and even now in some coteries: "In many ways, Sidhwa's novel is a lament for women who suffered Partition and who remained silent for decades keeping their stories of horror hidden from the national gaze" (Khan 55). The 'slippery' way patriarchy goes unnoticed to becoming part of common ethos in different cultures is what the four-year-old character Lenny Sethi faces ; she sure loves her brother, Adi but each time she is being systematically referred to as being inferior to his brother she asks questions and sometimes protests. Here, and in other examples, Sidhwa agitates for gender equality in her writings:

Through sexual awakening, sexual victimisation (rape, forced marriage) and sexual discrimination Sidhwa's [...] women learn of the gendered oppression that works through their bodies. Grappling with a range of victimisations, the female figures, [...] female sexuality and bodies are defined, controlled and exploited by men under the guise of

socio-cultural and religious [...] .(Chaudhary i)

Bessie Head portrays Diekeledi in *The Collector of Treasures*, as a symbol of the resistance of some women to the continued oppression that societies impose on them. The character had to resort to violence to ascertain her dignity as a human person. She ends up being jailed for killing her husband Garesego who is outright irresponsible and maltreats her as a mere sex object; he is also highly irresponsible as a father of three children whom he abandoned for many years without care. Garesego however got more than he bargained for when he exercised the 'male-sense-of-entitlement'. He got his penis cut off which is another symbolic representation of power being taken away from the oppressor.

The express recourse to seeing the society with androcentric lenses as a readily available viewpoint, (un)consciously, is getting stronger, but the effort to setting the Nigerian space on the path of a feminine friendly one is ongoing, and it must be said that the results are being seen already, even though it appears there are still several millions of miles to cover.

On April 14, 2014, there was a landmark judgement from the Supreme Court of Nigeria which put to rest the issues surrounding female-child inheritance in Igboland. The agelong customary practice that refused the female-child of the deceased right to a share of her father's estate was invalidated by that judgement. The domination, subjugation, discrimination and humiliation suffered by women in Igboland by the will of their parents was put to rest after several decades of such a practice:

In my family, I am the child who is most interested in the story of who we are, in ancestral lands, in our tradition. My brothers are not as interested as I am. But I cannot participate, because Igbo culture privileges men and only the male members of the extended family can attend the meetings where major family decisions are taken. So although I am the one

who is most interested in these things, I cannot attend the meeting. I cannot have a formal say. because I am female (Adichie).

The latter part of this thesis is primarily a compendium of short stories using narrative identity as my bedrock; writing what I have experienced. There are some experiences that cannot be personalised, especially as a man researching feminism. I cannot capture menstrual cramp, neither can I rightly capture the agonies of the women I have come across that are passing through one form of subjugation or the other. Many times, I have taken it upon myself to help these women to access resources that I believe could be helpful to them. And this thesis is another contribution.

Clannish Claw expounds the fang of culture and custom on the freewill of human person. The story depicts the tradition where a widow is another proprietary item of inheritance. Any uncooperating widow is edged out, and denied due recompense from the estate of the deceased husband. The story explores the travails of women in the hands of unfriendly in-laws in Nigeria. It cuts deep into the veils of tribal sentiments and ethnocentrism that has plagued many marriages in the country. Kufre a young soldier in the Nigerian army from the Middlebelt marries Jemila, a lady from the Northern part of Nigeria to the disdain of his people who prefer he marries from his clan. The marriage was going smoothly until the soldier's demise. His death is an unfortunate incident that leaves her a young wife widowed with two children. This sets the tone of the story as she faces a backlash from her unloving in-laws who never accepted her from the beginning of the relationship accusing her of taking their son away from them. In the struggle to make her life meaningful and offer due support to her children, Jemila suffers social degradation, gender subjugation among other humiliating factors that lead to her son taking vengeance and ending up in jail.

Physical, emotional, financial and sexual tortures are some of the cases of violence against women. Women's experiences of these kinds of harm are compounded when such abuse is also happening in their marriages, from their partners. *Begging Mercy* is a story of a successful lady that gets entangled to a man that she believes has genuine love for her until she realises she is living with a psychopath. Mercy a young, sophisticated business executive who has been unlucky with her relationships and desirous of marriage becomes the victim of an opportunist young man, Johnson. The characters typify the struggle of the Nigerian working class—young successful ladies who are unlucky to find true love; instead, they fall in with streetwise, intelligent and calculated young men who take advantage of successful girls. The romantic flavor Johnson wraps around Mercy hoodwinks her to believe she has found true love but unknown to her, he is after her father's fortune. Her family could see through the façade that the young man projects but blind with love, Mercy rushes headlong into the marriage, spending a fortune on the ceremony. She starts seeing the true side of her man when their quarrels degenerate into domestic violence and he comes back pleading with a promise to be a better person. Her inability to provide funds for his business ideas turns him off emotionally and the domestic violence increases. On the advice of her brothers, she finally goes to court to put an end to the marriage.

“The hood does not make the monk.” Lot of women have been taken advantage of in their most vulnerable state by the people they trust; father, brother, uncle, friend, colleague, teacher or religious leaders. *Papal Entreatment* gives an insight into one of those agonies of a lady that got seduced, impregnated and denied by a religious leader. Justice got served at the end despite the agonies that come with societal rejection, especially from one's family.

In April 14, 2014, over 200 girls were abducted from their school in Chibok town in Northeast Nigeria by Boko Haram. There had been news of some of the girls being returned but

over a hundred of them have still not been found to this date. *Amiss Nowhere* is a tale of a missing child and the shock of the abduction on the family, the entire neighborhood at large, and the devastating effect on the psyche of the victim cannot be conceptualized. This was also an exploration into the social conditioning of African women to never marry a younger man; the pride of begetting a child and the unfortunate rise of pedophilia with girls being the victims steer the mind in the challenges of Isabella, an academic who holds a PhD in Soil Science from Aberdeen University, Scotland. She returns to Nigeria after many years in Europe only to discover that she has past her sell-by date being in her 40s'. She tries a relationship with a man few years younger than her but could not survive the criticisms that follow her decision; hence, she quits. Unfortunately, she never finds the partner of her dreams as many men find her resume intimidating; she continually edits a part of her life to accommodate them, but the trick didn't work. After many medical attempts, she begets Azanat, a four-year-old who goes missing. She is later found only to discover that she has been abused by some unknown person.

"Your kind of feminism is not my kind of feminism" is one albatross to the success of this lofty movement. The continued in-fighting in the body polity of the feminist movement is what *What Suzzie Wants* captures. The fragmentariness in the movement has led to different voices; the temperament of the different factions could be taken to be positive as self-determination is an inalienable right of every individual, and everyone will respond to the climate in which they found themselves but when there is an imposition, just like the (neo)colonialist imperialist hold to loop everyone and everything together; there is bound to be chaos. The rainbow is beautiful and the understanding that the layers are not just shades of primary colors makes its allure. The diverse opinions on feminism especially with the appreciation of the in-between should be welcomed.

In October 14, 2016. Muhammed Buhari, the President of Federal Republic of Nigeria while on a state visit to Germany was asked why his wife said she may not support him for a second term bid in office. He answered that his wife belongs to the kitchen and the 'other room'. To me, this was a reminder that women are given little or no consideration when it comes to career growth or political aspirations. The high-achieving ones are seen to be some 'classy prostitutes' who had risen through 'bottom power'. *Table D'Hote* is an opener to this perception of some people in the community. It offers a sneak-peek into the lifestyle of Nigerian girls and how the society perceives them in this story of a young female executive who gets a promotion and intends to honour her team with a celebration. Mary puts a call through to one of the high-profile restaurants in the upscale part of Lagos to make orders. Her list is quite expensive and classy which draws a cynical remark from an uncultured customer service representative of the organization who didn't realize that she has not hung up on her caller. Mary overhears; ends the call never to transact any business with them despite several follow-up calls.

Rape is criminal. No means no, and this should be respected. *Fargin* is a tale of forceful entrance. Two young lovers, a boy and a girl, find themselves knotted in a world of admiration. Jide, the male, who is a bit older than the girl, the narrator, ticks all the boxes of the ideal boy. He is intelligent and ahead of her in education. The girl builds her life along his tracks as he too nurses the ambition of going to a higher institution. Her parents absolutely approve of their relationship. Thus, Jide begins to groom her for sex and not a relationship; he eventually deflowers her during one of their intimate sessions as he plans for a holiday vacation in his hometown. Emotionally broken, she tries to find solace in her sister who dismisses her pity and advises her to accept the order of things.

Conclusively, this thesis is undertaken with the aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse and to awakening the consciousness of the world to the continued oppression and subjugation of women in my homeland. The right of an individual should not be restricted or restrained because of their gender.

Gender matters everywhere in the world. And I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently. (Adichie)

As a people of the world, we need to change our attitude towards those some consider the 'weaker sex' and know that our common humanity has not rated anyone inferior or weaker than the other, unless we are just bent on cheating ourselves out of the common best that is inherent in everyone.

CLANNISH CLAW

... stories that I have heard; events that I have witnessed.

The members of her late husband's family were steep to draw blood. They were not expected to be friends, but it would be a lot better if they would not be enemies. From the word go, they kicked against Kufre's marriage to a middle-belter, *a woman from another place*.

"Why would you marry a *gambari* when you can marry one of our daughters here?" they had protested when their son introduced Jemila as his betrothed. There was a breather when Kufre and Jemila had to set their abode far away from everyone. And now the hate speeches have started again. Jemila was on her knees filled with apprehension expecting to be mauled after they would have exhausted all the expletives that human reasoning could gather. She was shivering like a featherless peacock stripped of her pride.

"When you and your husband were enjoying the good life all by yourself you didn't remember he has a family. Now that you have a problem you run to us," Chinenye, one of the oldest persons in the clan said and dressed down Jemila with a wry look.

"Is it now that you know we exist?" Alice, the immediate elder sister of the deceased chipped in as well. Nobody would want to hear a word from Jemila. Obviously, this is the prime time to nick a pound of flesh for the years they were shut out by the solid insistence of Kufre to stick with the love of his life.

Kufre had met Jemila during his training in the Nigeria Defence Academy in Kaduna. Apart from the Certificate of Excellence for Outstanding Performance and having aced almost all the courses

and trainings in the academy, he brought back with him a beautiful lady that he madly loved and whose impeccable understanding of the military life was impressive. Jemila was a daughter of an ex-serviceman who had always, with her parents, moved from one part of the country to another in her formative years. The benefits of being in the military or a family member of a service personnel was that you got a reasonable grasp of the beauty of geographical federalism of the Nigerian state; rich in culture, language and tradition. It was a given that an officer could be drafted to any part of the country at any time. When such clarion calls were made, nothing could hold the draftee; hence, non-patriotism in the military was a grievous offence that could result in capital punishment. You went whenever and wherever you were called. Jemila decided to stay in Kaduna to attend the university after her father Col. Lantang decided to settle in Makurdi, Benue State, his hometown after his retirement. Keep your tenses consistent.

Jemila filled with vim, employed her creativity and industry to work after her classes to make money to finance herself through school as the meagre sum she got once in blue moon from her parents. She saw the need for education and would do anything to get through the system. Col. Langtang's monthly pension came like a freckled winter-feel in an all-year summer, leaving the big family in dire financial straits. The farmland the Colonel returned to was yielding nothing other than a few vegetables, citrus and tubers, which usually were spoilt before he could even transport them to the city. There was only so much he could do as the roads were bad. There was no storage facility available for a budding farmer like himself. The big farmers suffocated the life of such small businesses in the bid to maintain top most echelon on the competition ladder. The government had no policy and political will to extricate starters from the big fish. Jemila understood this and she never blamed her parents for their little support. She set her eyes on her goal: education!

She had gone to the academy on one of her hustles; hawking her food when this lanky cadet approached and asked for a chat. She had thought it was one of those adventure-seeking military boys trying to sow their wild oats amongst the locals before they take off again to another base, as was often typical of the military boys. She had made up her mind that she would listen but would not yield to this one again; typically, [she gets such passes as frequently as the much needed oxygen] and she has her ready lines: “I am a student and trying to earn a life for myself, I am not into body-selling and if you are serious you stay with me and sell for me...” When the officers heard these lines they retraced their steps and never came back. These guys would leave but would tell their friends to give it a shot to see if they would be lucky with her: the officers kept coming. But Kufre was totally different. Please work on tenses.

Kufre introduced himself to her as simply as himself unlike some of the other boys who started the introduction of themselves by the medals they have not trained for and may not likely earn in about two decades to come. She knows their ploys and tactically deflates such impecunious bravery —*impiciliousness*-- having been harmed with the knowledge of the military workings herself. Her father was an officer and the man really sowed his wild oats. Hardly is a state amongst the Thirty-six in Nigeria that Jemila does not have at least a living step-sibling, older and younger; all thanks to the libido of the then young soldier father of hers. It was understandable; “the life of the military,” they say.

It was a magnetic attraction. Cupid at play. Love at first sight. Kufre’s voice sounded so different from the other boys’. Pure, undiluted, unshaken; raw green simplicity void of minutest self-importance.

They both bumped into one another as Jemila was talking with a neighbor of hers who had helped to bring her wares to the barracks. She was saying her thank yous and walking backwards

when she hit a rock. A human rock. Jemila expected a typical coercion to follow immediately as any military man is void of emotions in order not to be tagged a weakling and would act out at any slightest instance in a show of power. She quickly put her face down to avoid being tagged confrontational. She fixed her gaze on the nose of his boot. She managed to look up to the knee of his left leg, then to her consternation the officer bent down to pick the plates that were scattered on the ground.

“Hope you are alright.” The voice sounded like a piece of music. The chords were rhythmic.

The man cared less for his fatigue, very unlike his ilk as he picked away the plates. He rearranged them right there on the ground and carried them up hoping to put them back in the hands of the owner. Jemila beheld the six-footer before her. Her consternation was abated into surprise because very rarely will one enjoy such a kindness in that kind of a situation. If it were to be one of those ‘other boys’, it would have been the ‘perfect’ opportunity to yank a pound of flesh off her.

“I am fine,” Jemila managed to say with her shaky voice like someone holding back her breath.

Kufre smiled at her and he knew was going on in her mind: “Don’t worry,” he assured her, “but next time, forward ever”.

“Thank you, sir!” She opened both her palms to take the plates from him.

He gave a heart laughter, “My name is Kufre,” he introduced himself, “though they call me Kuf around here.”

“I am Jemila,” she fixed her gaze on his manicured nails. His palm was now dirty just as the knee point of his trousers.

“Then I can call you Jem?” He interjected.

She looked into his face for the first time. Her sight became dilated as she looked straight into his retina. At that point, her sense of smell interacted with other nerves and her mind tells her: *If he smells good he will sure taste good.* But she must act strong and not cheap. A lady must not let down her guard.

They both laughed.

“I am taking them to my stand,” Jemila gave the information without being asked.

“And where is it?” He tagged along.

She led the way and he walked beside her as they engaged in a friendly chat. When he had to say his goodbyes, so he could continue with his day, Jemila could not help but look forward to another meet. And within a few weeks they became an item. Kufre ignored the gossip in the academy to spend time with Jemila, the young undergraduate of the University who came to sell one of the rare cocktails; cooked brown Rice and Beans—*Wanke*—at the military college. The boys called at Kufre regularly to know how the lady moaned and wriggled during sex, but they would not get any leads. He bluffed them up, and even had to engage in a brawl with another just to get them to back-off from such meaningless locker room talks; it was a no-go area that remained private. Jemila became the enemy of the boys; those that lost in the bid to get down with her and those that felt they have lost a friend to love.

Jemila’s family refused to give their blessing to the relationship. Her father disowned her and gave a standing order to family and friends never to entertain Jemila under his name. It was just by a whisker that she did not become an added statistic for honor-killing because he saw it as an affront for a child to go against their family’s wish. If such a child is sent to the great beyond, it is better than the humiliation they bring to the lineage. And it is a honorable thing to do. That is the unwritten code people like the Colonel live by.

Kufre's family wouldn't want Jemil even if she were a thousand miles away from their village. What was so difficult to understand was that both families were Christians and rationale was expected to be a *porte-cochère* over whatever bight the geographical differences might present but sectorial hysteria dissolves godliness and religiosity.

The lovebirds bore it all. They stayed away from families and friends. What was important was the love they shared and had for one another.

"I am sorry. You are taking things too far..." she managed to find her voice amidst the cacophony. "I have come so that you may join me in taking care of these children especially when you have collected their father's gratuity from the military." She struck the cord where it was too painful for them and as if that was not true, they sprang to action, instantaneously, ready to draw blood, like a mob action, fists in the air waiting to land on her from all angles. The air was blowing hot. She was called many names: *onye iberibe*—stupid; *Enwe n'acha ucha na ecehe echiche ka mmadu*-- pale monkey with a human brain. She was almost torn to shreds; they zeroed-in on her like those golems in *Fear of the Walking Dead*. She took cover like a two-year old being swept under by a hurricane.

"*Weesh penshun dis one dey talk?*"—*What pension is this idiot referring?* The immediate younger brother of Kufre, Agwu (in an obvious drunken state with a flagellating posture swiftly swaggering forward and backward), said amidst stench of inebriation. "*The ghel pikin wey we born for we body sef no dey get anything for her pa house, make we not com talk you wey no from hia. Girl pikin property dey yim husband house. If you no know know now stupid gambari. Onye ike ngwu di ka gi n'ehi mgbe onwa gwuru* —Our girl child cannot lay claim to our estate as she does not inherit anything according to our tradition. She inherits her husband. You bloody childish weakling who leaks monthly." Nothing sensible ever came from a drunk. Jemila has indeed come

for her husband's property and should have been accorded due assistance if truly, as their custom says, a woman's inheritance is in her husband.

"Did you know what it took us to send our son through school? If not that it is almost midnight we would have sent you and these bastards you called his children out of this town tonight," Joe, a seemingly polished one amongst the lot warned her with his index finger pointing straight into her face close enough to blind her if she would lean forward.

Jemila stood glued to the floor where she was. Everybody had their say.

"I am very sorry I didn't mean it that way," she started rolling on the floor with tears streaming from her eyes. Her son, Bryan, was by her side weeping and begging alongside; she had learnt that part of the culture. Once a woman may have offended her husband or his family, but quickly gets on the floor and rolls, then the gavel may land with less velocity. True to it, that calmed some nerves and she was offered a tiny mat to sleep in the courtyard. The last meal she had was on the bus taking her to the village about six-hours ago. Her son knew what was happening, so he did not complain of hunger, but the tot had to be breastfed regardless, so she gave her breasts to the baby, so she could suckle on something; it was the last energy she had in her for the day as she listlessly laid on the mat, water flowing from her eyes. And she reminisced about her childhood, and her marriage to the best man that could have ever been her husband.

Like a Nigerian Ghengis Khan, Col Lantang spread himself wide and far around among the women he could reach everywhere he served. Jemila was his tenth child though his first daughter. "Colonel," as fondly called by everyone around him had met Laraba, a beautiful ebony lady from Biu in Niger state, Nigeria in the early 60s. They both attended a birthday party of a mutual friend where they became good friends straight from the dance-floor. And not too long after, they sent

invitations to friends and families for their wedding. Things were quite easy and there was no objection to the two getting married. The families were happy especially when “Colonel” decided to settle down after his popularity with women. Three years after their marriage, Colonel was posted to Zaria where he met Asabe and started an affair with her. He got Asabe pregnant just about the same time Laraba was pregnant with their second child. He fought a great battle within himself—but only on how to broker the news to Laraba whom he swore to love and cherish, to worship with his body and soul.

Ordinarily, Colonel would come home to his family who were residing in Biu every month but when it was getting to the third month when he last visited, Laraba paid an unannounced visit to her husband at his new primary place of assignment after his last departure. She met a lady that was heavily pregnant roaming the one-room suite. The suite was adored with pictures of the woman and her husband. She tried to contain her overboiling fury within herself by sitting glued to the miniscule sofa on the left corner of the stuffy room where she had her bags. She did not bother to unstrap the baby on her back who, thank goodness, was asleep. She refused all entreaties from the pregnant lady. She did not lay her finger on the glass of water that was brought to her as a welcome courtesy for a guest. If possible, she would not breathe.

When eventually he came, he was shocked and as the whole scenario degenerated into a big shouting bout. Laraba demanded an answer as to who the lady in the picture was. Asabe questioned her effrontery to demand who a woman in her husband’s house was. The entire barracks seemed to be dead to the noise that was coming from the suite and no one came around to mediate among the party but one could tell they were listening to everything. Colonel thought to himself that the best way to deal with the situation was to send one of the women away at that instant. It was not going to be Asabe as her father was a General and lived just a few blocks away from the barracks. Laraba

became the easy one. For a moment, they all ignored the crying baby on her back then Colonel explored the lacuna of the crying baby to crack a nut. He maneuvered Laraba out of the room by standing in front of her and walked gently to the exit of the room: "Come and feed the baby first," he said as he shepherded her to the other corner of the room, "in the first place, what are you doing here?" Colonel lashed out to Laraba, "You should have informed me you were coming. You cannot just hop into a bus and come here unannounced. What if I had gone away on a mission?"

Laraba could not take it. She redirected herself and launched at him.

He could not contain such insolence from her. He launched his fists. Laraba felt the bitter side of her Colonel. He did not care she was some months pregnant and having another on her back. He pummeled even the delicate parts of a pregnant woman. He kicked! He shoved!

"*Gerrarahia!*" He pointed her the exit. Threw her things after her and pushed his one-year-old son out too whom he grabbed from the corner his mother had left him while trying to feed him before the beating started.

Laraba had to beg Colonel to allow her at least to stay the night as she had nowhere to go at that time as nightfall was a dark cover for some nefarious activities. Zaria was not a safe place for a stranger to wander at any time of the day, especially women whose body parts could be sold. It was always in the news that one lady or the other was found with some missing body parts, mostly, breasts and vaginas; the parts obviously were harvested by human hunters who traded them for some ridiculous amount of money.

Colonel prevailed on Asabe who had thought her introduction to her senior-wife would be smoother than the drama that played out. They allowed Laraba and her son inside the suite. It was a ludicrous scenario. Colonel laid amongst the women. Asabe to the right. Laraba to the left. Everywhere was silent. The child laid on the floor after being fed rice and vegetable stew.

The next morning, Colonel did the introduction, and everyone acted their role. Laraba did not leave the following day as one would have thought. It would be too shameful for a woman to go visit her husband who was out of town and came back the next day. It would be too difficult to explain away, and it would be too difficult for gossips to understand. She would rather the humiliation from her husband than the public. She chose to live with Asabe and even relocated to Zaria, Kaduna state.

Colonel went on different postings to other parts of the country and everywhere he went he would get himself a woman before his family would join him. His harem increased with his boundaries. He was always making fun of his friends who had daughters:

“My lions will visit your tigresses,” he would say as he called his boys one after the other in the presence of his friends. As of last count he had nine boys before Jemila came through, Laraba his most beloved. Colonel loved Jemila and everything he would give to his sons he gave double to her. “My Jewel,” he would fondly call her.

Jemila grew up amongst boys, though she was treated as if she were fragile. Heavily protected from all harms. Shielded from the boys. And made to learn the way of the girls from her many mothers. Scarves. Skirts. Blouses. Shawls. Raised head. Stand right. No trousers. No talking to men. Femininity!

“You will have to come into the den to get this one tigress.” Colonel would not have his friends joke about his daughter as he would about their girls.

Jemila’s life was rosy until her father’s retirement and the teachings she had got from home never to open her legs to any man just to get things achieved remained with her.

The last stretch of her thought as Josephine, her daughter continued suckling on her breasts was Kufre-filled; the true solid romantic moments that could ever be shared by a couple; the harmony and sweetness. She could not stop the tears that streamed as she knew Kufre would have not allowed even an ant to perch on her; he would have stood his ground again and again to stop the earth from swallowing her.

She endured the pains of living under a family house as a homeless widow with two kids. She was abandoned in the corridor and left to literally scavenge for food like a mother hen unearthing the ground surface to seek any buried worms that her chicks might feed on. Many villagers refused to sell any food to her as they tagged her husband-killer. She had to do a long walk with her kids, the baby strapped to her back and the little boy walking by her side. They were all enveloped with beads of their sweat having to walk under a biting sun. It was a long walk, almost to the outskirts of the village before she could get someone to sell her some bananas. She fed her son who was obviously hungry and almost collapsing but remained strong for his mother. The boy's unspoken words were loud enough to keep his mother going. *Stay strong*. She bought enough bananas that would keep them fed for a while.

Two days later, a meeting was summoned. All members of the clan even to the neighboring towns were in attendance. The men had to decide what would become of Kufre's properties after his passing. That was the tradition. Whenever a man passes, his people will come together to decide the distribution of his properties; especially intestate, his Will may be maliciously sidetracked at times just for some self-interest in the name of giving tradition some primordial accord.

Oferi Agunnuka, the fiery one with a thunderous voice that scares the vultures broke the libation Kola nut and passed it amongst the men, the women observed the passage of stainless steel

saucer from the eldest man in the clan to the youngest. No woman may touch the Kola nut or distilled alcohol till the youngest man had been duly served.

“We have considered your condition just as it is customary in our clan. We have decided to let you remain with us, but as you must also know, it is our tradition that you marry one of your late husband’s brothers to ensure that you and the children will be properly taken care,” Oferi announced, “have I spoken your minds, my people?” He concluded with the rhetoric.

“Ee!!!” The unison voice came banging with a resounding affirmation mixed with cheers.

Hardly had the old man finished his statement that the men, both old and young at the gathering, pulled their caps and dropped them on the floor; an agelong tradition suggesting that she chooses one of the caps, in case she may be shy to verbally express her choice from the many men. Whosoever she chose would be the inheritor of her privacy and start taking care of her. It does not matter if the person had been married or not. If he had been married the existing wife or wives have no choice other than to accept her into the harem. If the man was unmarried, nothing would stop the him from marrying whoever he wants even after inheriting the widow.

She did a quick scan. The data was not at all convincing, even if she had no choice than to make a choice. The men came in different shades of crudeness.

Oluchukwu who just inherited the wife of his younger brother that passed away in an auto crash just a few weeks ago, was also present with his intumescent stomach. Common sense would have suggested that he stay away from this drama and continue milking the unfortunate demise of his brother that gained him a beautiful educated lady he might never had dreamt of getting close to, not to mention lay his fingers on, but a greedy lout will always seek free wine.

Today, the drunk appeared sober and clean. Obviously, this was one of the rare moments he had to bath and shave just to appear presentable. He stunk not from alcohol but mixture of different cheap perfumery that would choke an aromatherapy patient if such dosage was ever prescribed.

And there was a rainbow man. Alozie wore so rare a combination of colors from his head to his toes: blue, red, green, orange, white, purple—one could make some confetti. His Sunday best!

The men winked and smiled. A rare offering from them reaching out to her. The guts to win a woman they almost tore apart just few hours ago beats simple human comprehension. Kufre had been everything they were not. At that instance, Jemila remembered her marital avowal as well as the good time she had with her husband; they would both joke: *Don't do what I wouldn't do*.

After much hullabaloo about the union from both families, the couple decided to make Kaduna their home as Kufre went back and forth within and outside the country on different Missions. He would come home to his wife and would relay the different experiences of peace-keeping to her. Jemila had begged him over and over again to allow her to secure a job as it was always boring and lonely for her anytime he went out of town but Kufre had insisted that his jewel would not do anything strenuous; he was always ready to provide more than she would ever need so there would not be any need for her to ask. One major point for Kufre was that he wanted her to just glow as he would bless her with numerous gifts. Even when they had to wait for some years before they could have a baby, theirs was a rosy life that they became object of envy for those gossips in the barracks where they lived. Many soldiers' wives would wish their husbands would treat them to half of how Kufre treated Jemila but they were not so fortunate to escape the whipping from a military belt. No one ever heard Kufre raise his voice against his wife and no one ever heard nagging from Jemila. Peaceful and happy couple. They called one another: "MJ"- My Joy.

“That’s the only way we can be sure you will be taken care of as well as put our son’s properties to good use,” another one reiterated trying to talk Jemila into the idea as she became silenced.

“My daughter, I went through the same rite. Your late husband was my son. I have him for this man,” Beatrice, Kufre’s mother pointed to Uchendu, “and he is not my first husband. He is my third. I was given to him after his two brothers died mysteriously.” It was so pathetic how Jemila got to know that those he used to see as Kufre’s brothers were his cousins and step-brothers all at the same time and his father was to be his uncle. Bizarre! Beatrice did not have a child with her second husband; it would have been more complex of a knot to untangle. When Jemila finally broke her silence after listening to her mother in-law trying to convince her to pick amongst the tribesmen.

“Failure of which?” She managed to ask.

“You will go away from here with these bastards of yours,” one of the kinsmen yelled at her before she could anchor herself.

Jemila hesitated for a while, not because she was afraid to talk but because she wondered if she would still have her skin intact if she dropped what was going on in her mind. However, she braved it up: “Then I go away.” She made her choice even in the face of the ongoing furore.

They were all startled.

After a while, “You should thank your star that our son died at the warfront, otherwise, we would have made you sleep with his corpse in a lone room for seven days and made you drink whatever secretion that comes from his body after the seventh day. That’s our traditional autopsy. Ingrate like you,” said Dr Emenaya, an older cousin to Kufre and lecturer teaching Anthropology

at one of the universities in town. Jemila quit being surprised; the scholar's cap was one of the varieties on the ground.

"We will give you some time to think it through while you remain with us," Nnanyi Esther prevailed hoping she would be able to convince Jemila better than Beatrice, so she could have a change of mind.

But Jemila did not respond. At nightfall, she was treated to a meal of *Akpu and Banga* after the meeting. She knew it was not out of courtesy but a tether for her to believe they could be nice to her if she would pick one of the caps. She was offered a room and a bed, but she told them to allow her to maintain the same space as two nights before. Before dawn, while the village was still asleep, she caught the first cab to the motor park and from there she and her children headed to Ilase town in Ekiti to put up with her old friend, Bose.

Bose and Jemila had been there and done that together and they had been there for one another at different times. Bose's father was also in the military and served at the same time as Jemila's father, but her father was hit by a rebel's bullet during the United Nation's intervention in Mogadishu in 1978. It was Jemila's father that did both the legwork and otherwise to make sure that Bose's mother and her children got what the family was entitled to from the government; he acted promptly, and the government responded promptly. Both men were gallant soldiers. Their daughters were great friends.

Bose was at the marriage registry with Kufre and Jemila. And when Kufre passed she remained a friend still, though she tried to talk Jemila into accepting the offer from Kufre's tribespeople saying no man would want to marry a widow with two kids when there are still many beautiful single ladies with no issue in town. Jemila had given her the best possible answer: "But

my life is not about getting married or not. It is my life and I should have a choice.” Jemila would not have come to Bose if she had had any other choice.

Mr. Abbey, Bose’s husband was a nice man that obliged his wife’s request to allow Mrs. JJ— alias for Jemila Johnson—stay with them. He knew her to be a well-behaved woman who wouldn’t give them any trouble. He welcomed and helped Jemila with the kids to settle quickly into his big house and promised to get her a place as soon as the contract he was pursuing fell through. It was a payback for the kindness Kufre and JJ had done them over and again in the past. They were once without grains when JJ gave them tons of food and even put money in their pockets for upkeep. Even as both couples were still trying to make their own babies, Jemila remained a pillar of support, consoling her friend that babies will come when they would.

“Mrs. JJ your baby needs attention,” Mr Abbey would call her to come and breastfeed her baby on different occasions. And on an instance, Jemila had caught him watched her breasts to a point of lust and when their eyes met he ogled and smiled lasciviously.

“You know you have the finest breasts I have ever seen,” he finally said. She couldn’t broach Mr Abbey’s rashness with her friend so as not to cause commotion in her marriage, so she stomached it but saw the need to leave the place ASAP.

One afternoon after everyone had gone out, Mr Abbey came back home and offered Jemila some wine saying he wanted to have an early celebration with her for his contract papers had been signed.

“It is a non-alcoholic wine,” he cleared. She hesitated to take the glass but not to be a killjoy she took it in good faith. A poisoned chalice! She passed out and only woke up to find her stark-naked body smeared by semen. She wept as Mr Abbey turned around beside her.

“Don’t cry Jemila,” he called her by name for the first time. “We can keep this between two of us like two mature adults,” he smiled and reached to touch her butt. She elbowed his hand off before it would reach her. “I am sure you enjoyed it as you moaned and wriggled and asked for more. It’s been a while...hmm?” He became derogatory.

Jemila almost wept blood. She sprang from the bed not bothering to cover her nakedness when the vagitus from Rebecca, her daughter, came from the living room. Jemila cried the more when she found Rebecca all messed in her own fecal. She grieved that she has failed as a mother and defiled the vow she swore to with Kufre. Nothing came to her mind than to give in to the belief she held. Jemila dipped the index finger of her right arm into her vagina and cursed Abbey with tears rolling down her cheeks; a traditional belief that such a pronouncement gets better traction. She could only wait for her son to come back from school in the afternoon and before her friend would return she took her children and went out into the street with nowhere in mind.

She wept on the streets caring not if anyone was watching or not with her son and daughter on her back. As kind as the public could be sometimes someone approached her and offered her some money; he must have taken her for another beggar. Just as the first sum came, more and more followed. Then her first misery solved itself by itself; money for transport to Kaduna was completed, also she was able to get her kids some food.

By 9 pm, she boarded the night bus from Ilase motor park to Kaduna and just at cockcrow, after an 8hour-long journey, she was at the gate of Compatriot Barracks, Kaduna.

“*Who be you?*” one of the soldiers on guard asked to know her identity.

“*I be Mrs Johnson,*” Jemila answered, deliberately added that appellation to her name to garner more respect from the soldier boy on duty; and not to be taken as one of those crimson ladies

that parade the Barracks to display their wares. The soldiers patronize them and by the fence they pay for quickie service and they get quickie cum.

“Wetin you be want?” She was further asked to state her mission as the guardsman perused her from head to toe.

“I be wan see Tombra,” Jemila stated without adding the official rank to the name.

“Who be Tombra?” The officer demanded further clarification.

“Him been the Cantonment Commandant.”

“Shun!!!” The soldiers gave a salutation in their usual zombie-esque manner. They saluted their commandant who was in absentia.

“Who you be wey you call our oga just like dat?” One of the boys demanded the audacity that made Jemila mentioned their Commandant by name without due regard.

“I dey sorry, na Lieutenant Tombraye Alphonso I wan talk,” Jemila quickly rephrased herself and added the ‘entitlements’ to the name. In this military they cherish their ranks better than their breath. It was only Kufre that ever introduced himself as he was; Jemila’s father would prefer to be addressed as ‘Colonel’ even from his close relatives. They got some outlandish orgasm when you call them by the ropes on their shoulders and by the medals on their chests. It is the highest call to service according to them.

“If no be sey you carry pikin, I for frog-jump you this morning, I no wan know whether you carry breasts or yansh”- I don’t give a hoot about your physique, I would have dealt with you accordingly if not for the baby you have with you.

“I sorry sir!” Jemila apologized.

“Lieutenant go comot soon dey jog, siddon for dia, I go tell am you dey hia after him finish”-
The Commandant is doing his routine morning exercise now, I let him know you are here once he

is in the office. He pointed Jemila to the bench in a small hut by the gate as he lit his cigarette and puffed away. Jemila obeyed him but ordinarily the guardsman would not have the effrontery to stop her if Kufre were still alive; he dared not stop the wife of an officer, a senior officer at that. This one that is not even qualified to carry Kufre's boots.

"Oga sey him go see you very soon- The Commandant will see you in a bit," one of the soldiers had radioed the power house and the message was passed to the Commandant who then chose to see the lady in question straightaway.

Jemila was led to his office.

"Let her in," the voice from the inner room ordered.

"Yessire!!!" the guard officer responded and with the usual salute. She was ushered to take a seat while the Commandant finished with his guest. A tweenie came out smiling as she stacked away some currency notes in her back pocket. Mrs JJ's eyes caught her undone zipper. In her mind, it was too early for that kind of an act in the office. Too early!

"Oh Jemila, it's you," Tombra stopped at the door as he saw his guest off.

"Yes o, na me..., " she rose, *"...your boys..."*

She was stopped midway into her conversation by a touch on her left shoulder., "How are the children doing?" the Commandant asked as he walked her into his inner office. There was smell of sex in the air, which confirmed her earlier assertion. The teenage girl that left had just been laid.

"Jemila, you would not be going through this stress if you had played games with me. In fact, your in-laws wouldn't have laid a finger on Kufre's entitlement." It was then she got to know Tombraye had intentionally allowed her brothers-in-law to collect her husband's gratuity unlike the claim that their names were the next-of-kin.

“Tombraye, I have told you I cannot do something like that.” She switched to more polished English.

“You are my late husband’s friend. What do you expect people to say?” Kufre, her husband got killed in the line of duty while on a peacekeeping mission in Liberia; side-by-side he fought with Tombraye to ensure that Freetown was freed from the grip of the rebel forces. A gallant soldier and a true friend who took the bullet for his dear friend, Tombraye.

“Let people say what they like. You know you are my sweet-pie way back from the academy.” Tombraye was one of those arrogant army cadets that thought they could have whatever they desired. He had approached Jemila with lifted shoulders after one of their evening parades and when both were done talking he was not better than a wet rat crawling back into its hole after a hopeful visit to a church. Jemila defined her kind, which was beyond the grip of the kind of Tombraye.

“Apart from that, your wife is my very good friend.”

“Anyways, let us get you settled, then we talk more about this much later. OK?”

Jemila did not say a word at that instance. She had thought Tombra would have grown out of such a thought. He used to be one of the early callers that would come to her house after the passing of Kufre was announced on their return from Liberia. He provided everything Jemila and Bryan needed. For several weeks he would stay with them from morning till night playing the fatherly role. He was even with her at the point of delivery as Jemila was just two months pregnant when Kufre left for Liberia and it would have been their joy when he would come back to meet their bundle of joy but instead she only received his boots and Blue beret. It was expected anyways that Tombra played the role; apart from being a good friend of Kufre, he was the same person Kufre took the bullet for. Kufre took the bullet that would have hit Tombra on his back with his own chest

and he went down like a hero that he was. He fought to the last on the part of justice and freedom. He fought the gallant fight.

“You are still so beautiful as ever,” Tombra said as he tried to touch Jemila once again, but she tactfully stepped back leaving his hand to dangle into the void space between them.

The day Tombra asked Jemila, during one of his visits, to allow him to start taking care of her in the real sense, she was lost as she stared into his eyes and hoped for an earthquake that will break a Richter scales to consume Tombra. It was barely ninety days that Kufre passed. Three months! What a heartless demand on a pregnant widow at that short instance. Totally callous.

“Take her to H2H2,” he commanded one of the boys around.

“Yessir!” The zombie saluted.

He turned to Jemila, “Why don’t you go home now and meet me at the Officers’ Mess around 11pm.” He tried to shut her down and redirect her to the most important thing to him.

“Thank you. I will come with my children.”

“You know children are not allowed in the Officers’ Mess,” Tombra knew the implication of that simple submission.

“That will be difficult then as there is nowhere I will keep my children,” she diplomatically edged him out again.

And he knew he has lost her again like many other times.

“Bryan, you take,” he gave a bale of crisp twenty-naira notes to the boy as he winked at him, “you can come and see me after,” he hi-fived the young man. Bryan, in turn, gave the money to his mother. Kufre gave a fiendish smile with his gaze on Jemila’s chest as he wiped both his upper and lower lips with his tongue.

“Thank you!” Jemila exited with the kids following the soldier that was commanded to take her to a new place to stay; the soldier is *sugomu*—witless, walking as if he was marching, briskly, without consideration for a woman laden with two pieces of heavy luggage and two young children. He was a sheep leading its shepherd. Jemila knew where H2H2 Block was and needed no chaperone.

She was not so disappointed that H2H2 has become another white elephant by the Directorate of Military Service (DMS). The once most beautiful building in the barracks that saw the then Commander-in-Chief of the Federation to be declared open amidst fanfare was now derelict. The glowing paint has become gloomy like an orphan thrown out by their guardian. The only vacant room in the apartment had no lock and some of the louvres were missing, but she was at least grateful that she has somewhere to lay her head.

The next day, Bryan joined the servicemen who were jogging, as usual in the barracks. And he stopped by to greet “Uncle Tom” as he would fondly call him. Uncle Tom was Bryan’s godfather. He was practically birthed into his hands. He was there with his friend, Kufre, when the doctor announced the arrival of the bouncing baby boy at the waiting room where the duo army officers were waiting for the news. The couple had waited for long before their first child came. It was a blessing that the family had cut them off. It would have been lot of pressure on Jemila. Why the long delay in bearing their son a child? It must be a son. She would have been called barren, empty womb, unproductive pawpaw. Thank goodness, they did not shift ground in their aloofness. Even, Jemila’s parents would have been wondering if they had raised a productive fruit and probably concluded their daughter must have committed different abortions that damaged her womb. The plight of a married woman who did not give birth to a child the next day of her wedding was remotely taken off her doorstep.

Tombra was happy for his friend; eventually he would be called by the name of a father.

“Hey youngman,” Tombra welcomed Bryan into his office after due protocol had been followed; the guardsmen remembered the cutie’s face. He was there at their office barely twenty-four hours prior. “How is your mother and sister? Hope you are being the man of the house correctly.”

“Everybody is good.”

Tombra pointed him to the seat right opposite him; he had two stripling strippers to the right and left of his shoulders who were working on softening his muscles. His shirt was sitting on the armrest of the chair while his belt was unfastened with his zipper down and one could have a glimpse of his erect manhood standing concrete still with its head peeking out like a prisoner. He passed the tobacco stick in his hand to Bryan. He rang-in one of his boys and ordered him to fill Bryan’s glass. Immediately the officer left, he signaled the girls and they removed their panties and one of them went down on him giving him a deepthroat while the other kissed and put her pointed breasts in his face. Bryan watched and felt like his soul was leaving his body. Never had he seen a sex scene before. Raw sex.

“You want to join in?” One of the girls asked. He shook his head, to indicate his refusal. The trio laughed.

“You are being baptized today,” Lieutenant Tombraye said and pulled Bryan to himself.

“*You baggard! If hai com hia and see you tumoho I go show you pepper,*” the army officer’s tantrum was direct as he threw banging punches on the door of Mrs JJ’s stall.

“*Abeg konsida mi and my pikin,*” Jemila responded, “*no worry I go com see oga for office.*” This calmed the nerves of the agitated and cursing officer.

“*Make sure e no pass dis nait o!*”, he warned before he left.

Jemila had gone back to selling *Wanke* at the Mammy Market in the barracks and her business was growing.

As they returned home that night, riot broke out in town and everyone scampered for safety. She wandered from one street to the other with her kids, lost in thought and very disheveled. She clung to Rebecca and ran through the crowd amidst tear-gas from the military to dispel the crowd protesting the maladministration of the current government. She was all about safety. For the night and for her kids. As much as the horror of the night was, she made it to the barracks in one piece holding tightly to her son's wrist as they both ran through the streets, ducking when necessary. Rebecca would not stop crying. Because of fear of attack on the military facility, the section of the barrack must be evacuated. The only place she could run to was the executive wing of the barracks. She was lucky to have met one of the guards who had seen her come to Tombra's office on duty. He allowed her a place in one of the rooms in the quarters. He even provided food for her and the kids making sure they were comfortable for the night. The guardsman did not bother to take them to Tombra as he said he would be busy with his family. Jemila thanked him and settled in, unsure of what would come next.

BEGGING MERCY

As usual, Johnson had come home late and drunk. “Where is my food?” he yelled at his wife. She shook as if tremor had visited the earth.

“Welcome my sweet darling.” She made to hug her husband, but she met a shover.

“Who is your darling? You moron!” He moved past her and sunk himself in the couch.

Mercy knelt before him trying to unfasten his shirt buttons. It was hot in the room as she couldn’t power the generator herself especially in her condition – the last month of her last trimester.

“You are as useless as anything the world has ever witnessed,” he wouldn’t stop, “you now wait for me to do all the chores in the house?”

“I couldn’t pull the generator because I became too weak immediately I finished cooking,” she made to explain herself away like a caring child tendering to an uncaring adult but was rudely stopped along the way:

“There was never a time you had strength. Useless thing!” He rose in anger, pushed Mercy on the other couch and hit her. “What do you have strength for? I do all the work; all you do is sit at home. Bloody housewife, whatchamacallit?” The beating wouldn’t stop. “Look at your flippy-flappy chin just as the shin of a sumo wrestler a that is almost dropping to the floor,” he cursed. She wept. And he would not stop pummeling.

All went grey for a moment. Then blank. She passed out.

* * * * *

“You cannot marry that kind of a man... amongst many things he is a leech,” Dr Onukedo had said to his daughter when she had informed she would be marrying Johnson regardless of whatever obstacles.

“Father, I am more than convinced that he loves me, and I am ready to spend the rest of my life with him.” Mercy stood her ground.

“It takes more than love my dear daughter.”

“Maybe my mother would have understood better if she had been alive,” Mercy employed emotional blackmail and she burst into tears. That got the old man, as usual.

“If that is your decision, I wish you all the joys in the world,” the old man succumbed.

Mercy came back to life three days later; her protrusion was gone but no baby by her side. She remembered Johnson pushed her on the couch as he screamed, “Now get me my food you idiot!” She remembered Johnson stood up, went into the bathroom leaving her on the couch, having vomited on her. She remembered the vitriols...

“Please forgive me. I will never behave so rashly with you again. I am deeply sorry,” he promised as he knelt by her bedside in the hospital.

“My baby...,” Mercy wept as she looked up to the heavens and held her tummy. This was her 3rd In Vitro Fertilization and it was lost due to some crazy drunken son-of-a-bitch.

“God will give us another child,” Johnson pacified.

“Remember, if you must marry this man. Don’t come back here crying for help of whatsoever kind,” Dr Onukedo had subtly told his resolute daughter.

“I don’t think I would have any reason to,” Mercy rebuffed her father’s subtle threat. “It’s only your blessing that I need.”

“Then you have it,” the old doctor of technology reluctantly said.

'Thank you, Daddy,' Mercy won. Always.

She turned her face sideways to the right to look at Johnson who was down on both knees and whose shirt was soaked with his own tears. Her heart could not condone her baby in this state just like a loving mother would not watch her crying child continue in distress. She touched him on the right cheek like her puppy and held him up from the kneeling position then drew him close to her on the hospital bed. He leaned and sobbed on her. She had to pacify the crying baby now. They both clung to one another like the biblical allusion of one-flesh.

The doctor came in: "Oh, I am sorry for such a rude intrusion." The couple laughed.

"Nothing is going on Doctor," Johnson responded wiping off his tears.

"Johnson, you needed to see yourself shivering like a featherless fowl when your wife was rushed in." Then the doctor sounded broken, "*Please do everything to save my wife*"—he gave a perfect mimicry of Johnson. Everybody laughed, and Mercy felt Johnson's love was indeed genuine if the doctor's words were true.

The couple were free to go home now, just for routine medical check-ups that could be attended to an out-patient section of MotherHen Hospital.

"Deal with her gently, I know how women could be at times," the Doctor whispered to Johnson as he pulled him aside.

Johnson got his annual leave and spent the two weeks at home tending to Mercy, not allowing her to lay a finger on any chore: breakfast in bed, exquisite lunch at exquisite restaurants, great dinner laced with expensive bottles of wine. The old groove came back.

“You may have to take up the tending of the house, after all, there is nothing you do at home all day long,” he made his intention known eventually. But Mercy used to pick the bills till she stopped working and all savings have been used for fertility treatment. Two failed IVFs.

Johnson had only picked the bills for few months before he had to send the maid packing on the ground that he couldn't afford her salary again coupled with other household bills since he was the only one shouldering the expenses. He couldn't convince Mercy to call her father and brothers for financial help.

“I will not call you Chuks and Jude.” Those were Mercy's words to her brothers when they tried to talk sense into their only sister. Both flew into the country from their base when their father informed them of their sister's decision as background checks carried out on Johnson did not come out good, but Mercy stood her ground, insisting that no one will change this decision she had made. No one. She said they were still checking on Johnson of old, “he is now a changed man!” She announced.

She looked into her husband's eyes as they clang their cups and drank their last bottle of wine the last evening of his leave. Her love for him was never at any time dimmed. He reaffirmed his promise but this time he laced it with the assurance that he would quit drinking altogether. She wanted him so badly that night and she held his right arm and led him into the room. They made passionate love all through the night like they had not done in a long time. And as they lay exhausted in bed, her mind drifted to Dolapo, her old friend whom she had severed all relationship with.

“Dolapo, what do you mean I should be careful the company I keep? I suppose you are not talking about Johnnie dear?” she had queried her friend who had shown concern about her choice of a man.

“I know you are a matured lady capable of making your own decisions and standing with their consequences but when a man will go into tantrum at the slightest provocation... Please watch it.”

“I provoked him that day,” she defended, “more so, he only gave me a light slap on the cheek. He would not hit me.”

When they parted that evening, Mercy decided to keep Dolapo and every other person out of what goes on in her relationship. After all, it is a relationship just between two people, Johnson and herself.

She sighed and resumed another hot sizzling session. She made sure Johnson was drained.

The newfound honeymoon continued for some time. It was a happy home again.

Six years ago, Mercy had returned from the UK after bagging a MBA *cum laude* degree from one of the Ivy Leagues. She was to head her father’s IT firm as the Executive Director but decided to go low and seek a job experience with another company. And on pure merit, she got an executive role in one of the leading banks in the country. Being a workhorse, she soon became the Head of Investment Banking in the group. A beautiful full-figure lady making heads turn wherever she went. Beauty and brain. But lonely. Too lonely. Her last relationship ended with her first degree. A campus love that did not go beyond the campus gate. She had been in few relationships afterwards but mostly FwBs- Friends With Benefits. . She was looking forward to the man that would come

forward. She knew many of them admired her from afar, but she would not play cheap and ask a man out. A man is expected to chase.

She voiced her frustration in finding a man to a female colleague over a lunch and two days later a bouquet arrived at her office. Flamboyant colors perfectly selected with a fresh aroma that would dazzle Cinderella. Mercy was excited wondering who could have sent the flowers. The gifts continued arriving for the next two weeks with love notes that were fast becoming part of Mercy's daily devotions. She made them into stick-ons and stuck them on strategic points in her office space. She looked forward to getting more each day, from the mystery lover. The entire office looked forward to seeing the delivery guy every day. The ladies rushed to her door once she took delivery of the bouquet just to read the fascinating note that accompanied the Jasmine.

Beauty is lost.

Beauty is found.

Your beauty is timeless.

Your beauty is peerless.

If you get lost.

I will find you.

The girls cheered at such poetic masterpiece, but they were more confused at the identity of the sender. They wouldn't be able to unravel the mystery. They gave up.

The next bouquet read:

For your eyes only

Dine with me

At Xavier

Tonight.

1900hrs.

Just as the note read, Mercy hid the note from the usual parties. No one should know her mystery lover till she met him first. She rushed home at close of business, shaved her legs, jumped in the shower and waxed her spotless ebony skin to a flawless smooth glassy feel, then dressed in her crimson velvet dress flowing to her heels. Her lips gorgeously painted with a shade of vibrant red with her highlighted cheek-bones having a tilt of fuchsia pink blush.

As she walked into Xavier, she became the cynosure as she was ushered to a table at the private section of the five-star restaurant. The light was dim with faint sounds from the piano and a lady singer karaoke-ing the beautiful timeless love songs of the 80s. She settled into the seat and as she was dabbing her face with a white handkerchief from her purse, she felt an arm on her right shoulder. The figure smiled at her as she looked up to behold...

“Johnson!” She screamed.

“So sorry I kept you in the dark this long...”

“It was you all along?!!!”

“Yes. May I sit with you please?”

“Why did you have to take the long route?”

“I am being careful,” Johnson responded as he settled into his chair. He wore an effulgent black shirt on a deep grey ankle length pair of trousers with his blue and grey stripes pair of stockings neatly fastened on his neatly laced shined pair of shoes. He oozed out an outlandish flavor of mix of coffee and vanilla. His beards were well-trimmed as usual, and his pink lips were tantalizing as ever. A handsome young man with a brawny 6 foot 7inch frame. A delight to behold.

“Being careful of what?”

“You are my superior!”

“So?”

“I don’t want to lose my job.”

“What has that got to do with asking a lady you like out?”

“I hate scandal.”

“You are still not talking.”

They both laughed.

“May we place our orders now?” Johnson passed the menu to Mercy.

“You need to clarify what that meant...” they laughed more as they both looked at the menu in their arms.

“I like Italian,” Johnson hinted.

“Spaghetti Redondo is my favorite.”

“Hmm...”

“Wanna try that?”

“Anything you want.”

They signaled the waiter at hand. The order was placed. The chat continued.

“Now tell me.”

“From the very first day you walked into the establishment, I have had my eyes on you, but I wouldn’t have the confidence to make the move,” Johnson’s cockneyism, the wavelength and modulation of his voice at intervals with his rather active gesticulation were impeccable; it all sucked Mercy in effortlessly. Come to think of it, she had listened to Johnson many times during various business pitches but never had she sat with him with romance hanging in the air.

The food came.

His table manners were excellent as he managed the cutlery perfectly. Dabbing her lips with the serviette when they ought to be dabbed; lifting and leaving the knives appropriately when they ought to; he rolled the fork in his left hand in the bowl of the long slippery slimy pasta, pulled it up and trimmed the edge with his knife. On the other hand, she opted for the chopsticks. They joked about it.

“Our ancestors knew chew sticks. I have not learnt chopsticks,” they both laughed again.

She thought he must be a perfect package as he made her laugh ever since they have been at the table.

“So, tell me how you eventually garnered the confidence to make the move?”

“I overheard you the other day...,” he gave a shy smile then covered his face with both of his arms as he stopped midway, then continued, “I hope I will not be accused of being a stalker?”

“Not at all,” she smiled then braced her right elbow on the table and buried her chin into her right arm, paying rapt attention to his epiphany.

“I heard you talk to your friend about being lonely then I told myself, the moment to make a move is now...”

“Then you became a poet?”

“I have always had it in me.”

“Hmm... those were thrilling lines...”

“Thank you.”

“What do you want?” she asked him pointedly and the atmosphere became still. He was lost in the moment that he had to drag himself back to reality. She asked the same question again:

“What kind of a relationship do you want?”

He chuckled, “I want companionship.”

“Just companionship?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you have to wait so long to have companionship?”

Then he told her a tale. The tale of heartbreak. The irrecoverable shattering that crumbled the membrane of total trust and true dedication.

Johnson had told the tale of how he loved Josephine who was a high school heartthrob so passionately that he had to battle the emotional trauma that followed the betrayal of his love.

After graduating from high school both lovebirds continued seeing one another until they got separated by going to different universities. Johnson opted for University of Makurdi, Benue State in the middle-belt of Nigeria to study Banking and Finance while Josephine went to University of Nigeria, Enugu, east of Nigeria to study Biochemistry. Their relationship consisted of constant exchange of love notes through the Nigeria Postal Service as it was not the age of emails and phone calls. Promises and reaffirmation of promises were conspicuous in each note with a bigger plan to get married as soon as both finished their respective programs and secured a job. Johnson would go 16 hours both ways on a road trip to Enugu fortnightly making sure he could bring the money he got from working as a tutor to his classmates to Josephine for her upkeep. Her parents were not doing much to make her adequately comfortable at school though they supplied the necessities. What Johnson traveled to deliver was just an add-on. Johnson never failed this fortnight travel to the East. Josephine would welcome him and take care of him, providing him the needed warmth. He relished the journey and he wouldn't share this love with any one else.

Then Williams, Johnson's cousin lodged in Lagos Airport Hotel in Southwest of Nigeria, 7 hours away from Enugu and 18 hours away from Benue after his arrival from the US, sent a

message to his long old cousin whom he had not seen for a very long time. Johnson went upstairs immediately the room number was reeled out to him. He met the door opened and let himself in. Williams was a scamp and knew no bounds as usual, Johnson thought as he met his cousin, who signaled him to a seat with his left arm, roughing it out under a duvet with whoever it might be. Young Williams stood up after few minutes, then the lady raised her head.

Josephine!!!!

And that was the last time he ever set his eyes on her and that was the last time he ever truly loved anyone.

Mercy showed grace and concern for a love that was betrayed.

“Did you ever ask your cousin how he came about her?”

“He said she was brought in by a pimp.”

“Where is she now?”

“No idea,” he shrugged.

“The greater the love, the greater the hatred that followed any form of betrayal,” she quoted Penny Jordan.

“What about you? What have you been up to?”

She was forthright, “I have not had any meaningful relationship in a long while.”

“Really!”

“Really. Thought you said you heard me say that to my friend?”

They laughed again.

He held her left arm, resting on the table, with his own left arm and looked straight into her eyes. He started playing with her fingers starting from her thumb, to the index, to the third finger then

he skipped to the pinky. She smiled. Then he came back to the ring finger as he clawed hers into his. He smiled, and she shook her head lightly then followed with an elaborate smile. He stood up with her left arm still in his and she followed the wave as he led her to the dancefloor. He placed his arms around her waist and she placed hers around his neck. They moved gently to the serenade of the band.

It was a great weekend for the lovebirds. Movies. Dinners. Saturday. Sunday.

Mercy glowed when she came into the office on Monday morning. The flowers did not come, and everyone was worried about the deliveryman. Very unusual. In all, the aura around Mercy was flamboyant. She was livelier than ordinary. While everyone was looking out for the door, she was looking out for the windows as Johnson's office was just on the other side of the building; his window was just directly opposite hers. She left the window open to get fresh air. Johnson likewise.

They would spend the weekends together at his place. She wore a different cap once she stepped into his apartment. A girlfriend showing her cooking as well as her prowess in bed; oiling her rusty joints to earn the most pliable contortions for his convenience just as she was ever flexible to explore new grounds with him, again at his and for his most convenience.

Set this up. Don't just write "Grapevine." (ex. Indicate how much time has passed here--- weeks, months, days? She was in the washroom when she over heard two women talking.)

"Have you heard?"

"What is it?"

"J got the girl pregnant?"

"What girl?"

"The intern!"

Mercy stiffened. She went blank. Totally. The two parrots continued the conversation in the lady's, oblivious that anyone was in the stall or so she thought, but later she wondered if they knew she was there and were finding a way to break the news to her. Mercy had to be as professional as she could, as expected of an executive in a workplace. She sucked in her tears and walked to her office. Later that night, when Mercy tried to confirm the news to Johnson's face, he got infuriated. She tried to calm him down, asking to know the truth. He violently shoved her and took off. She broke down. He walked away from his suite. She stayed in the house all alone all weekend. He never came back to the apartment. She was worried as he would neither pick up his calls nor respond to the texts she sent. She did not know anyone to call to reach him. No friend. No family. The next time she saw him was on Monday. The windows were opened as usual on both ends and this time the delivery boy came:

Sorry it took so long.

Please forgive me.

The friends that were excited the mystery man finally came through again and who would not decode the message all chorused: "Please forgive him?" They even created different alibis: "Maybe he had to go out of town for something important..."

She held the note and looked outside the window. There was abundant gloom in the air and she wore the heavy heart throughout the day. She gave the alibi of her monthly flow for being responsible for the mood because her friends that knew the delivery boy expected she was to be happy especially when the wrinkles of puffiness had disappeared from her face. She dragged through the day looking through her opened windows over and again, but she did not see a trace of him again apart from the first glance from him in the morning. Then his text came: *I be at home.*

She took off with fright. To the house. His house.

The pathway was laced with petals. She followed the lead. She forgot the ominousness momentarily and anxiously followed the trail. The coral sure attracted some butterflies as her belly was filled with them, then the petals turned to whorls of corolla and then to one bouquet to another leading through the stairwell of the big mansion, up the steps to the master bedroom. He was there in the room dressed in all-white, with singlet and linen pants. She loved to look at his well-toned biceps and abs. Dude got it.

“You see the wilted petals?”

She stood at the door trying to bring back the angst to her face. She did not respond to the question.

“Did you see the beautiful corolla?”

She remained firm. Tone-deaf.

“What about the radiant bouquets?”

She saw that he wasn't expecting an answer.

“Those were the steps to nurturing. I know I am the worst shittiest asshole in the world right now but if you will be with me, I assure you there will no more of this shit. I promise.” He went down on both knees holding her by the waist leaning his head on her on her belly-button like some pulmonologist listening out for that beat from a dying patient during defibrillation. She responded as she planted her fingers to the root of his afro and rubbed from the front to the back. She knelt to be at par with him on the ground and she planted a kiss on his lips.

“You know I love you?” She did not allow him a breather to answer before she doubled the passion of the kisses. One thing led to another. The bra flew in the air. The panties flew in the air.

The legs were parted. He planted himself inside of her in no time. He turned her over and went in from the back and she gyrated to the rhythm of his mumbo-jumbo while her moans choired along.

Exhausted, they both lay on the carpet in silence.

“What do you want to do?”

“I have told her to get rid of it.”

“What did she say?”

“She is willing if I pay her a good sum.”

“How much?”

“Half a million but I do not have such a sum now because...”

“I will give it to you,” she did not allow him to explain the inadequacy. This, and much of this scene, do not seem plausible. Work on pacing and set this up more. Why does she give in so easily? Show why she is so desperate and needy.

He turned to look, her eyes full of disbelief. She nodded to assure him it would be taken care of.

They both lay there silent for the rest of the night, watching the stars and the moon through the opened window pane.

The story making round about the pregnant lady vaporized just as the lady herself exited the organization without resignation.

But a few lines of news crossed to Mercy: “Johnson is a pathological libertine with eyes for ladies of class and opulence. He professes his love, plays their gigolo, milks them and moves on.” Agnes, who was one of Johnson’s numerous ‘body counts’, talked to her during the lunch at the office one of those afternoons and Mercy betrayed the best kept emotions she had handled for a while and went all-out to make a defense for her secret lover. “Those ladies were the ones throwing

themselves at him,” she reeled what she was fed by him, “Can’t you see he is a tall, handsome and successful young man?”

The girls around the table suspected something and in no time, it became obvious, like a lit lamp that could not be hidden in a dense dark room. It was obvious that Mercy and Johnson were items like the inseparable house of a living snail. They came out of the closet. Then the mystery was resolved. Mercy’s friends felt betrayed but Mercy cared not what they thought. More stories came but they were all dismissed with a flip of an arm. The greatest gift she ever offered after each bad tale of her Johnnie was a big fat thank you.

“Thank you!” She would say, and the talebearer would sense the cold gratitude and the goodbye all at the same time. Then they stopped coming.

“Don’t you think we should meet my daddy?”

“Whenever is convenient for you, my sweetest dear,” Johnson responded offhandedly as morsels of succulent homemade pounded yam and well garnished vegetable soup filled his mouth.

“We can go tomorrow,” Mercy announced.

“Really!!!”

“Yes, really.”

Plans were made to meet Dr Onukedo.

“Why are you working in the bank?” Johnson asked his lover when he went to her father’s mansion, discovering it was the renowned Dr Onukedo. Mercy had not revealed that part of her to him during the few months they dated.

“I need the experience to manage the Group eventually,” she whispered to her Johnnie prompting him to lower his voice as her father might not be comfortable with such a chat. The

business mogul would only be interested in the ingenuity of their relationship and the plans they had.

“How do you do?” Dr Onukedo greeted.

“How do you do sir?” Johnson responded crisply.

In no time, the talk began ranging from sports and politics to others. Mercy took pleasure to cook for the men as they had their talks. Johnson really came across as knowledgeable.

Then to the real talk of the day: “What is your plan?” Dr Onukedo dropped abruptly. He caught Johnson off-guard and he almost choked on his drink while trying to answer the question.

“I want to start an auto-shop and bring the sleekest cars to the country as my customers will be...” Johnson reeled out a beautiful proposal and Mercy’s father listened to him unflinchingly till he exhausted himself.

“I mean what is your plan with my daughter?” The elderly man clarified.

“We plan to get married,” Johnson answered succinctly.

“Ok!” The elderly man gave a light squint like someone who just bit into a bile duct.

“Food is ready,” Mercy finally announced and that saved the day. The old man walked, slowly and deliberately, to the dining table. Removes his glasses and said the grace. Mercy would not stop smiling as she knows her father will not miss the grace.

Dr Onukedo excused himself immediately, having eaten a handful of the meal of the day—fried rice and grilled chicken. Mercy knew something was amiss. She knew every action and reaction of her beloved father.

“Why did your dad walk out on us?”

“It is nothing.” Mercy did not tell Johnson that her father had said he could tell that Johnson’s emotion was in a fleeting state that flows with the sea waves and might disappear with the whirlwind.

“Is it because your father thought I don’t belong to your class?” He employed the social-class blackmail, but Mercy doused the whole situation and told him the man was just exhausted.

“If you have made up your mind we’ll only support you with the wedding expenses not the marriage cost,” Chuks, Mercy’s elder brother told her.

“You may not even bother about any wedding arrangement as everything will be taken care of by Johnnie my love,” she boasted.

The chemical reaction of romance is usually more potent, and it usually overrides common-sense, insofar, the delusion seems real nothing else would seem normal. Mercy financed every aspect of the wedding without a kobo contribution from Johnson who told a tale of how his money was trapped in an investment that would only mature in a few months’ time.

Johnson could never be wrong. Mercy was only interested in proving the rest of the world wrong. She would not query what the investment was even though she held a cum laude master’s degree in Investment and Finance.

“Johnson has changed for real,” she replied the last time she was prevailed upon to have a rethink by her father. Her father and brothers could only watch the love opium ravaging the mind of their daughter and sister. They wished her well.

Mercy took the dive by resigning so that Johnson could continue working in the bank as it was the policy of the company they worked for that partners could not work at the same time in

the organization. She occupied an executive position and could easily get a job in another organization. Better still, she could manage her inheritance, but the latter would not be entertained till she had this fight to finish.

Mercy got another job with another big bank, but Johnson had to prevail upon her to quit working altogether as he gave the excuse that the physical and psychological demands of an executive were putting strain on her ability to conceive just as her workout plans must be stopped as well to allow for the medications to be effectively efficient.

Mercy did not question Johnson's decision. He was the lord and savior of the family. She was ever ready to do anything to please him; very in love.

"I have this business idea that I believe we can work to achieve only that I do not have money for now," Johnson hinted her of his plan.

"How much are you looking to raise?"

"Just 5 million Naira!"

"I do not have that for now, but I can talk to some friends."

"What about Chuks and Jude?" Johnson felt that should be the easiest way to raise any fund as the guys would not leave their only sister all alone to herself without any meaningful support.

"I don't want to talk to my brothers and father for now."

Johnson thought of another way out, "What about those shares?"

"What shares?"

"Microsyn Integrated!"

"But you know I cannot sell those..."

"We can do a change of name..."

"Does not look easy as it sounds but will talk to the solicitor about it."

“Let us try.”

“OK”

The lawyer would not be able to effect any change without the approval of the Board and Dr Onukedo was the Chairman of the Board so Johnson became frustrated but pretended it was no issue as the severance benefit from Mercy’s retirement could be used.

He started the business, but he needed an expansion. Again, Mercy refused to call her brothers and from that point Johnson saw no marriage again since what he wanted could not be achieved and things got compounded when Mercy didn’t get much from her father’s Estate.

Johnson became a full bred monster.

* * * * *

“Please don’t say anything to Jude about this,” Mercy begged the new doctor, who just acquired MotherHen Hospital, who happened to be her brother’s friend. “It is just a minor misunderstanding.” But the doctor couldn’t resist the temptation to break the doctor-patient confidentiality; he was forced to call both brothers when their sister was brought in on a stretcher with a ruptured ovary.

They flew into the country and talked their sister into asserting her right in the court of law. They stood in for their belated father and she got everything they both ever worked for.

Johnson would not stop begging Mercy to come back but she is far gone, Far away.

PAPAL ENTREATMENT

These stories are true. At the time, I said to myself that what I did was okay...But what I learned later in life, too late, is that when you have power over another person, asking them to look at your dick isn't a question. It's a predicament for them. The power I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly.

— *Louis C.K.*

My brother, Colbert wouldn't stop ranting when he got back from his routine evening walk. I enquired what the problem was. "On my way home," he started, "I overheard two girls talking behind me. Their voices were loud enough but I feigned ignorance of their language." He paused with disdain on his face. "I felt disgusted when I looked back; they were two schoolgirls in their school uniforms."

"Why disgusted?" I asked.

"One of the girls told the other: '*Funke so wipe ohun o date man yen, wipe Uncle ohun ni.*' *Funke* hinted she was not dating that man and that he is only an uncle," he pouted.

"And?" I enquired. He looked straight into my face, "Suzie, you know I am not a saint, but I will never toy with an underage person. Yuck!"

Then I understood his point and I reminded him of my experience with Father Rex and the tangles of the aftershock to all.

Sibyl had gone into Father Rex's office after weekend Choir practice. She seriously needed some counseling. She had sinned. "Father, I have come to make a confession."

"You have come to meet with the Lord," Fr. Rex responded with a tonality of grace heralding a sinner into the presence of the lamb. He was sitting in the confession box comfortably; the only visible part of his body was his torso though covered by a lustrous cassock and a collar; his face was girded by the crucifix, specifically the corpus; a symbolic representation that the confessional is to the Lord. He was just transferred from Heart of the Sacred, Umuleri, Enugu state to The Immaculate Heart of The Saints, Mbaise, Abia state, Southeast, Nigeria.

"Father, I think I have committed a sin," Sibyl started, "as a boy in my class sent a letter to me." She lowered her head, fiddling with her fingers like a teenager waiting to be scolded by her guardian because she'd broken the dishes once again.

"OK, a letter?"

"Yes, Father. It is a letter; a love letter. He said he loves me..."

"How old are you?" Fr. Rex exuded his typical gentlemanly smile, though his face could not be seen but one could tell from his voice that he was grinning.

"I will be fifteen in two months. Father, I did not tell him to write the letter."

"Now I understand your confusion," Father Rex replied. "It is no sin to get a letter from a classmate. Don't worry about it. That is no sin"

Her face brightened up. "True?!"

"Yes! I assure you my daughter."

"Thank you, Father!" She felt relieved, all burden lifted from her shoulders; her yoke is light now that she is sure she has not fallen from grace. She genuflected, made the sign of the cross and left.

A few days later, during the next rehearsal, a note came to Sibyl through the secretary of the Rev. Fr.: *See me after the service*. She didn't read to the end of the note as nothing could be more urgent, especially when His grace's office called.

"You are welcome, my daughter," the Reverend gentleman greeted as Sibyl stepped into the cozy office; the physical feel of holiness can be seen through the immaculate white marbles on the wall, roof to floor with pictures of The Ascension as well as the Father's visit to the Vatican adorning the walls on the right and left respectively. Only the right and left arms of the golden crucifix, which was right behind the black revolvable seat the clergy sat on, could be seen. The cleanly shaven pious frame of the Father overshadowed that of Kristi. Sibyl was directed to a seat right opposite the man of the gospel. He stared straight into her eyes and asked, "How many notes have you these past few days?"

She avoided the gaze, smiled and was silent with her face down as she fiddled with her right thumb.

"Don't be shy. Come on, tell me." The disarming smile gave her assurance; a confidence like a father would a daughter.

"No other note, Father," she dropped.

"That must be devastating for you."

She looked up at him, wondering what the Reverend gentleman was about.

He smiled. She returned the smile.

He winked: "We can exchange notes if you want?"

"How, sir?"

"That's nothing; we only need to be discreet with it."

"Discreet!?"

“Yes, like two adults,” he winked.

She lowered her face smiling like an excited nubile who had read almost all the best romances in town and was waiting to experience her first touch. Ever! She has overheard the nuns mention the goodness of the Reverend Father in a way that one would want to experience his kindness firsthand. This may be a way he treats everyone around him and Sibyll did not see any reason why an exchange of notes should be seen as harmful since the Father had said it was no sin.

Notes started coming and going. The more they came; the more the heat built inside of Sibyl as she felt this must be a rite of passage to adulthood after all. She would always pick up and drop her notes under St Peter’s statue by the right side of the fence of the church as that was the path that she would take on her way to and from school each morning and afternoon. The notes were signed with codes. RX for Rex and Sy for Sibyl. Only the two lovers knew the secret.

Come to De’Lange, tomorrow at 10am. Dressed and act mature!

Sibyl kept her appointment at the expense of her classes. She kept to the instructions as stated in the love note. She had deftly kept one of her pieces of house clothing in her school bag and when her mother seemed to have found something unusual, Sibyl told her they were for Physical Education as students may be required to change into something comfortable for the kinetic session. She was indeed acting maturely by being quiet, unlike when she would have spilled to her mother or friends.

Sibyl was the only child of her parents. Nothing was spared in caring for her and her parents always gave her the best they could offer. Mr. Agu Semenitari was a Catechist at The Immaculate Heart of The Saints and Mrs. Agnes Semenitari was in the service of the Abia State Government. They had minimal education to carry out their responsibilities as members of their community. Their strength was their excess of empathy. People were drawn to them from all walks of life.

They cherished Sib and she knew nothing would stop her parents from treating her like the baby that she was to them. But Sib wanted to experience adulthood like her classmates who would not stop to regard her as Saint Sib. She did not like to be taunted. She wanted to feel what they had told her they had felt with the boys and the men. She would honor her appointment and come back to tell her friend that she too could game the system.

The next day, 10:02am, Sibyl found her way to De' Lange. "May I be directed to Rex's?" she asked the receptionist. She had put on her best and looked totally different from a teenager. Her breasts were accentuated by a push-up bra, Marilyn-Monroesque; tiny cups holding a fuller measure beyond their capacity. No eye missed anything there. Her lips were steaming-glossy red, and her eyelids were smoothly matted with purple and her mascara was absolutely on point, making her eyelashes lush and pronounced. Her hour-glass hips and waist were well-put together into a pair of stretchy leggings. She had a figure of a full-grown woman but on second look, adolescence was well-written upon her no matter how deftly she carried herself. She had been obedient all the way as the note suggested they use first names in addressing one another when not in the sight of the church; that way they both would be more comfortable with one another. So she asked for "Rex" immediately upon her taxi's arrival. Rex himself had arranged for her taxi to pick her up by the far end of the school once she had scaled the school fence, She felt chauffeur-driven as that was her first cab ride alone. Nothing had ever been a 5-star treat for her like this.

"Room 8!" The receptionist gave a non-committal response like a one-time secretary cum lover who used to be the only sugar in the boss's coffee. Now, though, she was but an ex-lover welcoming a new lover into her boss's domain. This woman's scorching stare at Sibyl was disconcerting but the newly matured, or so she thought, young girl ignored it altogether. The Reverend Father may have already visited his grace upon her.

“Thank you!” was Sibyl’s only reply. She sleuthed through the hallway of the building so as not to miss her door and in no time, she gave a soft knock on Door 8. Her palm was moist, her legs were shaking, her fist was weak and her heart throbbed as she was about to see this man of hers.

“Hey! Good you made it.” Rex held her as soon as he ushered her in. He was well-shaven and an innocent-looking fine gentleman decked out in a multicolored striped T-shirt and a blue denim pair of pants with his feet adorned in shinny brown loafers. He easily passed for one of those runway models.

“Good morning, Father,” she genuflected.

“Shh! REX! My dear! Rex! Leave this kneeling down to the vicarage,” he reminded her of the house rule as he latched the door shut behind her.

“Oh Rex...,” Sibyl wriggled herself free from Rex’s grip. He let her go. “... “how come you know a place like this?”

He laughed, “This is *mosafunento* -- a rathole. I chose here so we can have unbridled access to each other.” He dove into the bed and asked what she would like to have but before she could make her choice, he picked the dialer and ordered a big bottle of dark ale.

“Any malt drink would do for me,” Sibyl interjected.

Rex gave a wry smile unlike his usual gentlemanliness, “...and a bottle of Malt.” The order was complete now.

The order came with five pieces of well-garnished chicken thighs. Sib salivated at such a sight. It was another of his 5-star treatment for her. The last time she had chicken was during the last Christmas and she was never entitled to the fleshy part of the chicken as those were for her parents; she received the drumsticks only.

Hardly had they finished their meal when he grabbed her and fiddled with her shirt buttons with an impious dexterity. She started panting as he put his arms to work around her. He gently planted his lips on her and putting life to the many characters of the Mills and Boons she has read, she responded with a parody of professionalism gyrating towards him.

He held her close and dipped his tongue into her mouth. She received him with equal measure and he received her as well. To and fro, the tongues traveled; hers into him then his into her. He brought out her left breast and cupped it in his right hand. He rolled her over fully and moved his tongue from her mouth, kissing down her throat which caused her to moan in both a tickle and in passion. He moved his head down slowly to her right shoulder and sucked and licked it. Then he went further down.

“I thought you were sworn to celibacy?”

“Yes, celibacy with grace,” he said amidst a disarming smile.

“Rex, I have not done this before,” she said as he was pulling his shirt off.

After, she watched him as he gasped for breath. She smiled. She had been made a woman by a man of god.

“I thought they said it is usually painful the first time?”

“Only if it was not done by a professional,” he winked and they both laughed it off.

“Hmm, I liked it.”

“Good you did.” He turned around to lay face-up, “Oh, the condom!!!,” Rex screamed when he realized the condoms were still mint as they laid on one of the headboard’s bookcase shelves.

“Are you safe?” he asked.

“Safe? How?”

“I mean your period?”

“Oh, I am good with that.”

She was too naïve to understand safe and unsafe periods of the month. She did not know what he was driving at, but she answered in the affirmative all the same.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” She crawled up to him and laid her head on his chest listening to his heart. A graceful satiation settled around her as she believed a bounty awaited her on earth and in heaven. He lay placid and was running his right arm through her plaited hair.

“Sibyl dear, not many people enjoy this privilege. Keep it to yourself. No one should know.”

She quickly got dressed and left to return home just as she would from school. Rex gave her some money for her cab and upkeep and possibly to secure some protection, maybe a Morning-After.

“Thank you, sweet darling.”

Immediately she locked the door behind, Rex dialed the front desk: “You may come in now.” He did not bother to get his clothes on and the lady at the front desk arrived and went into Room 8 without knocking.

Sibyl snuck back into the street, already into her cyan pinafore over a white sleeveless blouse school uniform with all the concealer and mascara washed clean; quite drably to what she was earlier in the day. But her heart was lively. She looked forward to another rendezvous. Maybe a further entry into his higher place.

Many days after *De’Lange*, the notes stopped coming altogether regardless of Sibyl’s dedication to the ritual of checking under the rock every time. Rex had a plausible alibi: “The pastoral pressure has been much lately.”

Sib did not hear anything from Rex anymore. He would not even look her way during the service procession unlike before when he would point to her as a paradigm of dedication from his pulpit while preaching during the mass. Heartbreak was a bad experience.

“Sib, what’s happening with you?” Mrs. Sementinari had to ask her daughter two months after she realized that she hadn’t come to ask for money to buy her sanitary pad.

“I don’t know what you mean mom,” she responded.

“I mean your period,” the mother cleared the air.

“What happened to my period?”

“You have not bought pads lately?”

“It just stopped coming.” She was answering her mother with grave naivety.

“We may have to visit Doctor Say-It-As-It-Is to find out what the cause is,” Mrs. Sementinari wanted a medical review before going forward with any premature guesses.

They headed off to the Doctor’s with Sibyl running to catch up with her mother who appeared to be flying on her feet rather than walking.

The forty-something year old bespectacled Doctor whose thick lenses sat on his nose who got greater respect because of his shiny grey hair and flaky white eyebrows that were taken to be signs of great wisdom after due diligence:

“Congratulations, grandma,” Say-It-As-It-Is confirmed Sibyl was ten weeks overdue and indeed pregnant.

“TSH-I-B-I-L-I has killed me o!” Mrs. Sementinari without waiting for further news from the doctor, took to her feet like a gazelle that was lucky to sight a hunter aiming the gun at her, she shouted through the community as she wept while the pair headed home with her wrapper flying in

her rush and anguish. She was a very active woman: industrious and religious and a dedicated member of Good Women's Society of The Immaculate Heart of the Sacred. "Diswan na disgrace o!" She rolled on the floor like she'd lost a loved one.

Sibyl's father had to cut short his trip to the synod in the neighboring village. His presence was urgently needed to determine some important issues in the family. Women were not allowed to make decisions in a very crucial situation like this. Maybe Sibyl would be able to talk to her father as she seemed closer to him than her mother.

Meetings were summoned. Questions were asked. Threats were issued and everyone was aghast at the revelation: "It is Rex."

"Who is Rex?" her impatient father asked with a visible rage which would consume her if she tarried in her answer.

"Father Rex," she finally dropped. The room went gravely silent and a piece of wool would have made a banging noise if dropped at that moment.

"Which Father Rex?" her maternal uncle finally broke the millisecond silence. "The same one," she responded amidst heavy tears.

"You are a liar!!!" everyone chorused. Everyone believed Reverend Fathers live under the singular law of celibacy.

Nobody believed her. Nobody.

What could have been the first pointer of proof had been burnt; all the notes were set on fire right in the presence of Rex inside Room 8 at *De'Lange* the other day. Sib carried them everywhere she went, but he had foreseen a scandal happening should the notes slip into the public. He saw the notes as Sibyl was stowing the money he gave her for her cab when she was leaving the Rathole.

He asked that she pass them to him for safekeeping. He burnt them all to ashes with the light from his cigar.

Father Rex only shrugged it off as a rumor going around with his pious Sunday sermon: *“There is punishment awaiting anyone that goes about casting aspersion on His Holiness. Touch not my anointed!”*

The family, no one, would broach the topic with the man of holiness. He was sworn to celibacy. Nobody would violate his sanctification. He should not be bothered by them and they would not bother him.

Sibyl was withdrawn from school as conception and education were considered unseemly and it was illegal to carry out an abortion of any kind.

A fortnight into Sibyl's delivery, a letter came from the Synod, duly signed by Reverend Father Rex, being the head of the communion, announcing the excommunication of Agu and his family from the church having raised a wayward daughter. Sibyl's father became jobless but accepted his fate. Agnes was disrobed of her membership of all the Christian mothers' societies she belonged to. She was left to manage her situation and never to come to church again.

Seven months later Sibyl gave birth to a baby boy whose forehead and eyes resembled Rex's but still the norms of steely piety totally ruled out the possibility of Rex lying with a woman.

Father Rex requested a transfer to a distant village which was a rare offering since few ever requested such a remote post. He was taken to start another parish in a smaller village called Mbaise. He was gladly received for choosing to come on his own without having to be told to do so. He left a bigger parish to pioneer a small parish which was a rare feat amongst the modern Reverend Fathers these days. He was welcomed with pageantry.

Just a few days after his arrival, Father Rex met me while I had come to pray in the church. I was about to exit as he was about to enter the building.

“May the Good Lord bless you, my daughter.” He made the sign of the cross in the air.

“May the Good Lord bless you, Father,” I responded.

“My daughter, what is your name?”

“I am Suzie, Father.”

“Oh, what a nice name.”

“Thank you.”

“For a beautiful girl.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“How often do you come around here?”

“Once in a while, Father”

“You have a phone?”

“Yes, Father.”

“May I?”

“May I know why, Father?”

“Just to keep tabs on you and see how you are faring in this sinful world.”

“So nice of you, Father.”

My father was a member of the Synod. He was there when the letter of Excommunication was couriered to Agu; the manner with which it was done raised some dust but he was a lone voice.

The next day, I got invited to have a meeting with Father Rex in his office. I knew what he was up to and I prepared myself for him. It was not at all a set up. It was being wise. My father had

told me about Mr. Agu's daughter. He was not in doubt of Father Rex's airtight sanctification but there was also a need to listen to Sibyl.

I am proud of my father. He has always been one of those that use their brains. Faith is one. Critical reasoning is one. He made me follow the lead and I told Father Rex, I will be there.

The office is well furnished with genuine Italian leather Sofa and Loveseat sitting in the waiting area.

The air conditioner was blowing cool. It was hot outside. I was well covered with just my face, arms and legs showing. My father said I must not tempt Father. No seduction.

"You may go in now," the secretary announced.

"Thank you." I made for the door but it was opened from the inside by His Holiness. He ushered me in and pointed me to a fluffy-looking chair across the room. He pulled another chair that was by the wall next to the door and sat right into my space before I could even get to where he pointed me to. All the same I followed the lead. I sank myself into the chair. It was truly fluffy, not just by the look.

"You are welcomed, my daughter."

"Thank you for inviting me, Father."

"What do I offer you?"

"What else can be available in the house of the Lord?"

We both laughed.

"Anything you want can be provided. If not here, we can go somewhere."

"Where do you know in this town? You arrived here barely a month ago."

"Don't try me. I know places already."

"Tell me."

“I know the Saucy Inn.”

“Saucy Inn?” I gave an I-beg-your-pardon look.

“Yes, Saucy!”

“Do you know what they do there?”

“I don’t know what they do there. Want to tell me?” He gave a criminally innocent look.

“I heard it is a bar and some chalets for street people.”

“Been there before?”

“No!”

“Want to see?”

“For evangelism?” I inquired for further clarification.

“We will sure be winning souls,” he said with the same devilish smile he had on since I came into the office. Every now and then he ogled me and each time I caught that glimpse I evaded it like he must have had some dust which fell into his eyeballs. “I will call you to let you know when I am heading there.”

“OK! Father.” I made to exit then and he stood up right in front of me and asked that we pray. He held me by the arms before I could make up my mind. He rubbed his palms on my palms then ran his right arm on my left wrist, all within a few seconds. I looked up at him but he had his eyes closed with his neck raised. He raised his voice in prayer:

“Heavenly Father, we thank you for this meeting. We praise your holy name for the wonderful thing you have been doing in our lives and for more wonderful things that you will still do. As we go out this day, continue to be our guide. As we go for this special occasion to Your service, we hope that no one will know when we go and when we come so the devil will not steal our blessing. Even our parents and friends will be surprised when finally, your mighty grace

descends upon us. We will not tell them anything. They shall see it by their own eyes. In Jesus name, we have prayed.”

“Amen,” I responded. He passed his message to me through the prayers. Coding and encoding!

I was dumbfounded but I have been forewarned of these likely events. I would have run out of that session if not for the need to stay calm. In my entire twenty-three years on earth, I am seeing in the real world what I have heard people talk about; the fall of angels, Paradise Lost!

I followed the lead.

“I don’t have the money for transport,” I let Rex know when he called that we would be going for our evangelism at Saucy Inn two days after our meeting. He had asked that I address him simply as that, R-E-X. I had refused his offer but he said too many courtesies breed great barriers to true friendship. I wonder what kind of friendship he wanted beyond the shepherd-sheep relationship. But I must follow through to see where he might take me.

“Will you be able to come by the Church to get some money?”

“I am not actually close by now.”

There was silence.

“Do you have your ATM card with you?”

“Yes.”

“Text your bank details to me.”

I did. And about fifteen minutes later, I got the alert. It was Five Thousand Naira. What I needed to get there was just Two Hundred Naira. I was impressed, indeed.

He rang my phone just at the alert point.

“I hope you can come now.”

“I am on my way already,” we both laughed.

“Women and money,” he laughed the more and one could tell he was very anxious to meet. I still feigned it was all evangelism even though I was smarter than that. I maintained it was evangelism. Coding and encoding?

It was daylight, about 11 am, but the red-light mode of Saucy Inn appeared to be widespread with sensual displays of wares. This was the first time I would be getting that close to this dead-end street. The northward part of town had been announced to every child by their parents to be a no-go zone. If indeed we had come to harvest souls for the gospel truly, it would surely be a bumper one. Underage girls that fall obviously below the curve of age of consent display themselves street-side waiting to be picked for whatever price they are worth; super- skimpy skirts leaving nothing of mystery to gaze at, transparent tops showing the titties of the totties as each of them tried hard to outdo the other in their chase for clients. Turning and winding their bodies like a serpent receiving justice from a colony of ants; they wouldn’t stop twisting.

As I was looking around to find my way through the den, I felt an arm on my left shoulder. I was startled. It was Rex. Rex was disguised with an artificial beard and a black cap on his head while sitting over his face was a pair of dark sunglasses. I understood he had to do what he had to do just to get to the bottom of the matter. But why he chose somewhere cheap and tawdry for an important meet like this baffled me. Anyways, I was just following the lead.

“It is me.”

“You startled me,” I said, gasping.

“I never meant to.”

“Let us go in.”

“In where?”

“A place we can talk.”

“Ok.”

He led the way. I followed.

Room 007, James Bond!!!

“Why did you choose a place like this?” I asked just as we settled into the room.

“You know no one can ever think we can be in a place like this.”

“Oh, I see.” He is indeed a very smart guy. I will never be able to substantiate how a Reverend Father took me to a whorehouse. It would be a phantasm and I would be made fun of, possibly be taken to a shrink. 007 indeed!

“What would you like to have?”

“Nothing for now.”

He toned down his disguise. The fake beard was taken off. The cap and the sunglasses followed. Then he pulled up his T-shirt and fanned himself with his hand.

“It is hot.”

“Oh yea,” I managed to say not displaying my discomfiture.

Then he loosened his belt. I had to readjust my sitting position. He fell on the bed backwards and he heaved a deep sigh. I was seated there on the loveseat by the wall across the bed saying my Hail Mary’s and counting my rosary at the same time, all in my mind.

He stood up and went into the toilet. I raised my feet up and folded them on the sofa, so I could create enough space for him to walk through easily.

The rustling of water from the tap stopped. He came out and locked the door behind him and he did the same to the entrance door.

I knew the show was about to go down and I was prepared for such a moment as he sank down right beside me on the loveseat. He was so close that the air wouldn't have been able to blow through. I dipped my left arm into my purse that I had kept very close, enough for easy access. He smelled good like a mix of vanilla and cocoa. I looked at him more closely. His skin was clean and shiny; I guessed it would be soft but I avoided touching him. He moved closer as I withdrew, pushing me to the edge of the seat. I had to stand up eventually and, of course, the only place I could move towards was the bed as the coffee table in front of the seat did not allow much space for choice. He was giggling and came after me. I asked what he was up to and he said I should know better as I am a mature woman.

"Is that why you brought me here, Father?!" I thought he should be cautious seeing that I was bold enough to look him in the eyes and talk straight at him, but he was beyond reason. What was paramount on his mind was to ease himself off regardless of how it might be achieved. I couldn't help but inwardly snicker, "A bit of saintly rape was assuredly on his mind."

I stood on the bed. He came after me.

"Forget it! I am human. Blood runs in these veins, You shan't have me and you are no true representative of the Lord!"

He was touching his skin. His eyes gave the ray of a serpent; the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The same false attempt of evil in disguise. This whole scene is melodramatic and facile. Work on language and pacing.

"Let's do it!" He moved closer with his arms spread and his fingers beckoning:

"Come! Come!! Come!!!" Each of the "comes" came with a step towards me. He refused to back off and was left against the wall. But I had my bag with me. He moved closer and I told him to stop for the umpteenth time and he would not stop. I had to resort to the spray. I pressed it into

his face. His scream almost brought the roof down. He jumped up twice before finally crashing into the bed:

“My eyes! My eyes!!!”

I jumped over him as he kept rubbing his eyes with the back of his palms rolling on the bed like an empty barrel. I quickly unlatched the door and ran to where the church elders were seated waiting for this exposure.

There was a heaven after all.

AMISS NOWHERE

Azanat is missing!

We have checked everywhere we could think of, even the oddest places that would not even hold a needle. Rationality isn't just common in a situation of pandemonium, especially when a lone child of a stricken aged woman strayed from under our nose defying all of our tentacles.

“Where could she be?” Rhetoric!

Her mother, my aunt, the younger sister of my mother, was already throwing herself here and there, stomping barefooted carelessly; howling, beating herself by the hips repeatedly, her hands flaying mid-air only to collapse them heavily on her cranium.

She got Azanat in her early 50s when the world has given up on her. When the neighborhood was an authority on her reproductive system and her menopause status was known by everyone because the more the wrinkles on her face as she ages, the denser her womb and the weaker her oviduct so she was good as unfruitful, they pronounced her a barren in their little gossip. She was a tactile example of the literal withered flower that women are said to be in no time: “they show great radiance at the early stage of their lives and that is when they attract the best of men with that beauty. Marriage should be their priority at that instance, nothing else. Marriage!”

Aunty Isabella holds a PhD in Soil Science from Aberdeen University, Scotland and had to return home to take up a lecturing job at Usman Dan Fodio University a few years ago, after she finished her program. My mother was her only confidante who disapproved of her boyfriend with whom she had a long-standing firm relationship.

“Sabe!” my mother’s pet name for her loving and trusting sister, “he is way too young.”

“He is a mature man and that is all that matters.”

“Get off your Westernized stance on relationship.”

From that instance, Auntie Isabella started seeing the immaturity in the young lover and they had to part ways when she could not see beyond that pointer. She finally mentioned her single-status to my mother during the wedding ceremony of their octogenarian father who just took a much younger wife after his wife passed.

“Now, we will start the search for a real man.”

Truly, the search began and all they found were men that would take off as soon as she talked about her education. At one point, she edited out that part of her life but when the men would hear she was past forty they would not come again, and one was confident to say she might be susceptible to difficulty conceiving or giving birth. The doctors advised that if she was interested in conceiving, that the best time was now. Her desperation became heightened. She tried out every semen, young or old, around her ovulation maybe there will be a hit somehow. Alongside many failed IUIs facilitated by my mother herself. In all, no one was recorded.

Years went by. Then Azanat came when she had given up.

Her wrapper was thrown away leaving her lower region exposed to all eyes, but thank goodness, she had on a cycling short that provided a cover for her privates. But who cares to look at the color of her lingerie? Everyone was just looking for Azanat. Our gated community which was heavily CCTVed became unsettled as everyone including the big outfit operators of the security system joined in the search.

“She is a four-year-old girl, wearing a flowery knee-length dress with her hair parted into two with red ribbons holding each bond”. We gave the description as sufficiently as we could. My father called the Toll-Free line of the State Emergency Service. The old man trusts the system like he had always trusted the 911 system of the worlds he spent his youthful days in while schooling

in the Americas, so contrary to the realities of the world that he now lives in. We would always make jest of his strong faith in that alarming and heartbreaking system. When he finally got through after almost an hour waiting period, they asked him to go to the nearest Police Station to lodge such a complaint as it must be done in person; it is a case of a Missing Person. Hurriedly we all ran down the street to the Police Station.

“How long have you been looking for the girl?” the officer at the counter asked.

“About five hours now,” my old man answered.

“Well, I understand your plight, but I am sorry we can only book this case after twenty-four hours as that is the law,” the policewoman on duty said, her body language devoid of any empathy.

“Is there any way you could just help us by putting your men on the alert, in case...?” Mr Maku, one of the kind questers that had joined us with his torch to locating our Azanat had attempted to ask further, but he could not find his question as he was stopped midway by the Officer-in-Chief.

“No!” she sounded flatly unconnected then brought out a file from under the desk she was sitting on to continue what she was working on without looking up at the faces of the people before her. We walked away from the station dejected. We had to prevail on Auntie Isabella as the action from the police made her madder.

We did not stop searching every corner on our way home. One search team to this side. Another to that side. The disappointment became graver when our searches had coalesced to nothing on our arrival at home. Auntie Isabella wouldn’t stop rolling on the ground—swinish; a mother’s rage. The world became still for her. All she wanted was Azanat.

A call was put through to Azanat’s father. The call couldn’t go through because he was offshore. He worked in an oil-service firm. He was the Senior Manager, Production & Distribution with many other responsibilities on his laps—he had his other kids with different women as he

chose that path of 'being a father to many.' Goodluck, as he was fondly called, truly brought good fortune along Aunty Isabella's way as not up to a month that they met. He got my Aunty pregnant, even when it wasn't her ovulation. Goodluck accepted responsibility, though, Aunty Isabella wouldn't be bothered if he had acted otherwise as many a time Goodluck forgets himself; only sipping wine to keep himself abreast of himself. Revise the previous sentence and break it into several sentences. Whenever he had the time he would come around and Aunty Isabella would always be glad to have him around, much with the hope that Azanat might have at least a sibling but further trials had not come to fruition.

The search would continue the next day as we were way into midnight, but Aunty Isabella's wailing wouldn't let us leave for bed. Even if we had gone to rest, the melancholy of a grieving woman would pervade our dreams, so we had to stay awake to find Azanat.

.At that point, Aunty Isabella became numb to whatever was going on around her.

We went back to the police station, first thing in the morning, though few hours before the complete cycle of a day. "The police should be the best apparatus to beam such a search," one of us said, but we were dispassionately told to just wait till after 24hrs. But we came back home searching the more.

And just at the dawn of weariness we heard a cry coming from the gate. We rushed to the scene to see who was there, lo and behold, it was Azanat all by herself, a pack of biscuit in her hand. Her mother sprang to her in joy, lifted her and carried her inside, "she must be hungry."

Not quite a week after, Aunty Isabella noticed that Azanat would cry bitterly when passing urine and would scratch her private deeply when she sits. She brought her to my mother at one of the clinic hours.

Treatment for gonorrhea was commenced immediately.

Azanat could only babble, “The man,” as she pointed in no clear direction.

WHAT SUZZIE WANTS

When I see a fellow human naked I fear for my own privacy.

Every Sunday afternoon under the hair dryer at the salon, I tell myself that I need my moussed hair dreadlocked pretty soon, so I can avoid these weekly visits to the beauty parlor. But I would miss the gossip.

I decided to cool down my cranium under my cool-breezing air-conditioner after a truly hot session at the salon. I sat on my couch and switched on my pink laptop to surf the net for news. I usually lift up my legs on weekends since Sunday is the last rest day before the crazy Lagos bustling madness. From the roads to the offices and even demanding clients, they would drop a brief and seek resolution almost immediately. That all would start the next day. I always enjoy weekends especially when the kids are out in school and my partner's away on a business trip. I catch the sorry and gory tales of Lagos as much as I can. I hit one of the popular blogs in town. Headlines!

Chibok Girls Is a Ruse.

Post-Partum, Pure Madness.

Tips to Get Your Man in 2018...

The more I scrolled, the scarier the news. Then I came across just one that ticked my interest. The viral video of two women who were paraded in their rawness for being witches. They were being practically mobbed. My lawyer-sense made me uncomfortable with the story and I zoomed in. I did not expect the two senior police female officers to stand and watch the crowd molest the women to uphold the law as it is a statutory provision in the constitution: innocence until proven otherwise. I was horrified as the cheering crowd ripped the clothes off these young

ladies, tore their bras and panties to pieces with almost all the men present groping them in the name of conducting some unfathomed inquiries. The ladies wept and begged to be saved from the madness. The crowd roared in joy. And I wept when their legs were spread, and ground fresh pepper was poured into them.

What is our penal code on witchcraft! I am sure there is nowhere where jungle justice is enshrined anywhere in the constitution. Nowhere!

Then, I recalled the earlier gossip the salon.

“I went to the same university with her,” one of the patronesses of the parlor spoke out loudly, to gain the attention of others, “that’s the way she is; always sleeping her way through. Fornicatrix!” The seemingly educated lady buried her face in the magazine she held so closely, pretending she was talking to herself.

“Let me see,” the first interlocutor joined in, asking to see the soft sell. “Mtscheeeeew!” Her draggy hiss sounded like a sharp serpent-spit before she could even peek into the magazine, “Dokubo!” She exclaimed with disgust over her forehead to her wobbled lips exposing her beautiful gap-tooth.

“That Dokubo girl can sleep with anything to get whatever she wants,” another one boarded on the gossip bus without waiting to get to see the picture of the Dokubo.

“Ha! You know her too. The other day, I was told by a friend, that another friend told her that someone saw her going into a hotel with a married man.” The apprentice that was manicuring a client jumped in disregarding any boarding pass and at about that instant, she cut beyond the cuticles, with a resultant cry for goodness mercy to come with saving grace emanating from the owner of the ripped toe.

Talk was disrupted as everyone became a nurse wooling the bloodstream. One could tell that the conversation was cursed as hardly had the accidental medics finished applying first aid to the wound than the gossip resumed. I would have tagged along but the topic of discussion had no grain of truth.

The Dokubo they were talking aabout had both her first and postgraduate degrees in the UK. I know her to be studious and responsible. She is happily married to a Nigerian-American and they both live together in Cayman Island. And she is venturing into designing a fashion line.

I felt so naked as I drove to the office the following day with utmost dejection ripping my dignity as a human.

All through the week, I felt there was a burden to be unloaded and once Sunday came, I became lighter as I saw the look faces of the women as I talked to them about Dokubo. She is my sister.

TABLE D'HOTE

The cheering and joy of promotion could best be expressed with great celebration, especially when it has been a long time coming. Mary has just been promoted two steps ahead. It was well deserved. She had worked very hard to earn the promotion as she proved her worth; she ensured the market turnover and turnaround of the organization was unrivalled by competitors, locally and internationally. When the Board of Directors announced the upward movement, everyone joined in celebrating the new Executive..

Mary realized that the clapping and the cheering should be reciprocated, knowing well that she was just a team-leader, and the team members **MUST** be carried along in the celebration. She devised to take them to the best restaurant in town. She called Clamour4More Restaurant to make a reservation:

“Hello!”

“Welcome to Clamour4More Reservation Desk. How may I help you?” Mary cheerfully smiled at the courteous greeting from the other end. She didn’t expect less from a Five-star restaurant. “I need a table,” she responded.

“We are here at your service.”

“A stable table stationed at a vantage point by the window with no hindrance to the free flow of the cooling breeze that your center is known for, also at a point where I can have a panoramic view of the beautiful scenery of the city once I throw open the drapes. A clean tablecloth must have been soaked into the sweetest perfumery from the Middle East and dressed in the most beautiful rosaceous the world has in its collection. The table should be well-lit on

every side with sweet aroma effusing candles of different colours but purple should be more pronounced as that is the colour of the day.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Let me start with a vegetarian menu - cucumber, carrots, cabbage stylishly diced with a well-maintained heart-shaped stencil. Green peas and other celery spread adroitly on a wide stainless tray.”

“At your service ma’am.”

“Then get ready the menu of a ripened steaming-hot boiled plantain that comes with a sweetener dangling between a dry valley of two fully-marinated and well-grilled chicken breasts with each forming a mountain to the right and to the left, suspended on a grille for some time but given adequate attention not to be allowed to get roasted.”

“That’s achievable.”

“For the main: I want Rabbit stew skewed at the right side of the table and Lamb sauce to the left. A pool of professionally prepared *Lycopersicon esculentum* seating at the center of the table accompanied by fried beef and assorted parts of a cattle and a bowl of cock-a-leekie. Garlic and honey glazed pork chops. Seared venison, date syrup yoghurt, blackberries and cocoa nibs.”

“Noted.”

“As for the dessert: let it be bowls of chocolate laced ice cream of different flavours but I bet no one can resist the sweet-scent of Vanilla...hmmm.”

“Taken.”

“Oh, I almost passed the drink. Let it be connoisseur-endorsed French and Italian. Minutest pint or non-alcohol will be highly appreciated.”

‘May I know the number of guests we are looking at?’

“About fifteen.”

“May I know your name?”

“Mary!”

“Ms. or Mrs.?! ”

“It does not matter!”

“It is official!”

“Oh, I see... Ms,” she dropped

“Thank you, ma! Kindly hold on while I pass you to the payment desk.”

The receiver must have thought he had forwarded the call to the payment desk but Mary hears him: *“Don’t mind all these useless girls. She must be dipping her arms into the pocket of one big man that is why she wants to spend so much hosting her useless mates.”*

Mary ends the call. They call back but each time the introduction: Clamour4More is initiated, she tosses the line before any further sentence.

FARGIN

Jide had invited me to his house on a Friday afternoon. Everyone in the compound had gone out. His mother and siblings had traveled to Ijebu-Ode for the Christmas holiday and he would be joining them the next day. He had come home, primarily to see me, else he would have joined a direct bus to Ijebu-Ode from Ekiti where he schools. But he came to me because the last time we saw each other was two months ago when he came home to get his foodstuff and stipend. I had seen him off to the park. He looked at me and expressed his love for me the umpteenth time. Even though I felt he was lying, I still want to take him seriously--I am just a fresh high school leaver and he is a brilliant young undergraduate professing undying love for me.

Everybody says I have a figure of a full-grown woman with the right curves and shape. But I don't see all of those. They even say my pretty face will give any beauty queen a run for whatever she may profess but I still don't see that. I have many years ahead of me. I look forward to attending university and I must get myself prepared for what lies ahead. Jide shows interest in my study as he assumes the role of a guardian, thanks to my parents. They would always call him in to seek one clarification or the other concerning my program of study: "Why don't you go to Jide anytime you have issues filling your form. He is your brother anyway," my mother would say.

Brother Jide as I used to call him is god sent. Always. Ready to help. We got closer and closer. He knew I have passion for communication and he helped me through the rope of the Entrance Exam. His tutelage gave me an edge over my peers and I looked forward to attending a university anxiously as I am tired of the life I see around me. I don't want life in the slum and the only thing I can do is to better my life through acquiring good education.

“I am telling you the truth. I don’t like those campus girls. They are just too hypocritical for me,” he would say each time he saw I only took his words about the university babes with a pinch-salt approach. How could I have taken those sweet nothings seriously? Many times, I had seen him in an uncompromising state with different ladies. Pictures don’t lie.

“I would not be like any of those campus girls at all,” I promised my mentor. “Brother Jide, tell me what it is like on campus?” And he would load me with stories of gigs he attended in company of girls. This one wanted him. That one wanted him. Every girl wanted him. I started getting jealous even when my friends started showing interest as some of them begged me to meet him, but I hoarded the knowledge. He must be hot, I accepted eventually. But how does one determine human *hotness*?

“Anytime we are together leave off the brother appellation to my name. You make me feel like a pedophile.”

“Pedo...?” I wanted to be sure I heard right.

“Pedophile: old men that take advantage of young girls. Or. Am I?”

“Taking advantage of me? No! I love you!”

“I love you too.” Then he moved closer to me and tried to plant his lips on mine, but I drew back.

“What is it?” He breathed into his palm just as many toothpaste ads suggest for a breath-check.

“Do I have a bad breath?” he asked.

“Not at all.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know how...”

“You want to tell me you haven’t done this or more before?”

“No, I haven’t. I am a virgin.”

“It’s a lie!” he shouted.

“I am telling you the truth.”

He looked at me with astonishment written all over his face. He only moved closer and held me as both of us kept quiet for a while.

“Then I will love you forever.” He broke the long silence.

Just at that point a knock came at the door. We both rushed to the sitting room and feigned study-mode before he got the door. I still have my long dress and hijab intact as my father would not allow any of his girls to leave the house without it.

“I will be going back to school in two days’ time,” my lover told me at our rendezvous—a pavement outside of the compound. Everyone sits here but we would be the last to leave the arena; sometimes we would be there till late in the night since it is just by the side of the building. Since it is Brother Jide there is no problem. My father would even greet and walk past us into the house anytime he comes back from his séances. As far as anyone is concerned both of us are safe in each other’s company.

Just as we both went in for the night, Jide pulled me to himself. Immediately he bolted the door behind us and like a ballerina dancer I collapsed into his waiting arms. He kissed me. I responded. It was sweet. I liked it.

The next morning, I knew he would be standing by the window; his usual spot so I didn’t bother to look up at all as no one can see the inside from outside but anyone inside can see what is going on in the outside. He must be watching me as I carried bath water into the bathroom. I held on to the tip of my wrapper with my left hand as I carried the bucket tilting to my right. He

was smiling, so I gently returned the smile without looking up in the direction of the window. My father was at the backyard performing his ablution. His mother was washing clothes by the window. A neighbour was in the kitchen just by the bathroom and my youngest sister was having her bath outside by the bed of the tap. Nobody saw what was going on. It was just an event for two lovebirds. Just the two of us and I couldn't wait for everyone to go their ways. I couldn't wait for the night to come. I couldn't wait for the rendezvous seating on the pavement under the moonlight by the side of the house at the entrance of the Beer joint. I couldn't wait for Jide to latch the door.

"I will be going very early tomorrow. I have an assignment to submit by 4 pm," my lover dropped and I became forlorn.

"How long will you be gone for?"

"I can't tell."

The forlornness became more amplified as I imagined what one of those girls would do with Jide's lips. They would be willing and ready for him unlike me. I am not ready to go beyond what happens behind the latched doors. We have been had taught how it is dignifying to yield our hymen to our husband on the wedding night.

"I hope you will not go kissing every girl in your school?" I joked.

"I swear they are just my friends. I don't deal more than friendship with them," he defended.

Everybody had gone in. We had to go in also but not until my father returned from the mosque. He was usually the last person to come inside. Before now my father was the one that would latch the door but these past few days the onus has fallen on Jide and me. Just as expected, my father came back from the mosque. A few minutes after, Jide latched the door. Ordinarily, I

would have walked out of the dark part of the walkway to go wait for him under the light, but I stood close to him as he fastened the final bolt then I offered him myself. Just my lips. We both enjoyed the moment. He grabbed the opportunity. He cupped my breasts. I moaned. He held me close to himself and we were there for some time. We hurriedly broke apart when we heard footsteps. My father wanted to perform his final ablution for the day after his dinner before bed. The next morning, I heard his steps in the walkway as he walked past our room and made for the exit of the shared building. This time, though, he knocked on our door to inform my mom he was leaving for school. It was my message, one only I would understand. Then my long wait began.

A month after he left, he came back home.

“What do you mean by indefinite closure?” My mother had asked him for clearer explanation as he stepped into the backyard where everyone was seated, telling us the school has been shut down indefinitely following a violent protest by students against a purported hike in school fees.

“It means we would only go back to school whenever the school authority deemed fit,” he responded with his bright eyes glowing even in the dark.

“Adijat, when is your exam?” He asked.

My heart leapt. “It is some weeks away,” I managed to answer.

“When exactly?!” My mother exclaimed.

“Third Saturday from now.”

“Let’s hope the school authority will allow me to stay around through the period. I am available anytime,” he walked into the waiting arms of his mother and shut the door of their room behind him but I can see him beyond the door. What a glowing moment I got back into my life.

His five siblings love him. His friends milled around him for his warmth and large heartedness.

He is loved by everybody and everyone was happy to see him.

“Are you still intact?” Jide asked me the next day we met.

“As ever!” I smiled as I presented him loads of poetry I have composed even though I considered them arrhythmical. Still, they are songs from my heart. He laughed and presented his own. I read those words and wanted to hold him. I held the papers dear to me and hid them where even rats would not be able to locate. I have received love letters before. Quite a few. From those young boys that would not get their breakfast if they don’t complete their chores but what Jide gave me was straight from the heart (repetition). The first true love notes I got from a true lover. Original! These were mature lines from a matured man compared to those lines skewed from Mills and Boons then mixed with R&B lyrics diluted with some Hispanic Calypso and laced with Reggae from the Golden Era through to the New Age. You can tell such watery compositions from the poor mixes and the remixes.

Jide put me through my study. Most times we used their living room. His sibling would be there at times. We would only go beyond the veil separating the sleeping area from the sitting area if no one was in the house. Only then would we go into the inner room.

Three weeks came swiftly, and my exams went well but the result would come sometime later in the year. I would have to wait. We would have to wait.

“You know it is high time we lay ourselves.”

“Lay ourselves?”

“I want to have you.”

“Not yet.”

“When?”

“Maybe once I have gained admission. By that time you would have rounded up and married me,” I told my lover, but he went cold. I rubbed his body to calm him as that is what we resorted to do each time he wanted me. I watch him shower many times and he watched me too. The first time I was fully nude before him, I covered my private and my tits with my hands, but he made me comfortable telling me how gorgeous my body is. He made me realize I wouldn’t need the padded bra I have always worn. He likes the lacy ones instead. I exhibited confidence more and more any time we were together, and he had helped administer some ointment around my private at different times. We were discreet.

“My mom too never believed I am still a virgin.”

“How do I believe you are telling the truth if I don’t test it?”

“I won’t be a virgin anymore after the test.”

“I will be gentle...”, he mounted me, held me down under his weight.

“No! I don’t want....”

“Don’t shout,” he covered my mouth almost to asphyxiation and firmed his grip on my hands. He held both of my hands with his left arm pinned to my head by holding few strands of my hair altogether. I couldn’t move a muscle around my upper region.

I wept!

The mottled blood on the bedspread demoralized me gravely. Pain enveloped my whole being. I felt useless. My ego bruised. Trampled. Thrashed. Lethargy ravaged my soul as he was begging to say she was sorry, especially when he disappeared to Ijebu for the Christmas celebration.

I explained what happened to my sister as she noticed my broodiness. Surprisingly, she wasn’t alarmed.

“Just keep it to yourself, it’s no big deal,” she dispassionately consoled me. I watched her as she walked out of the room.

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